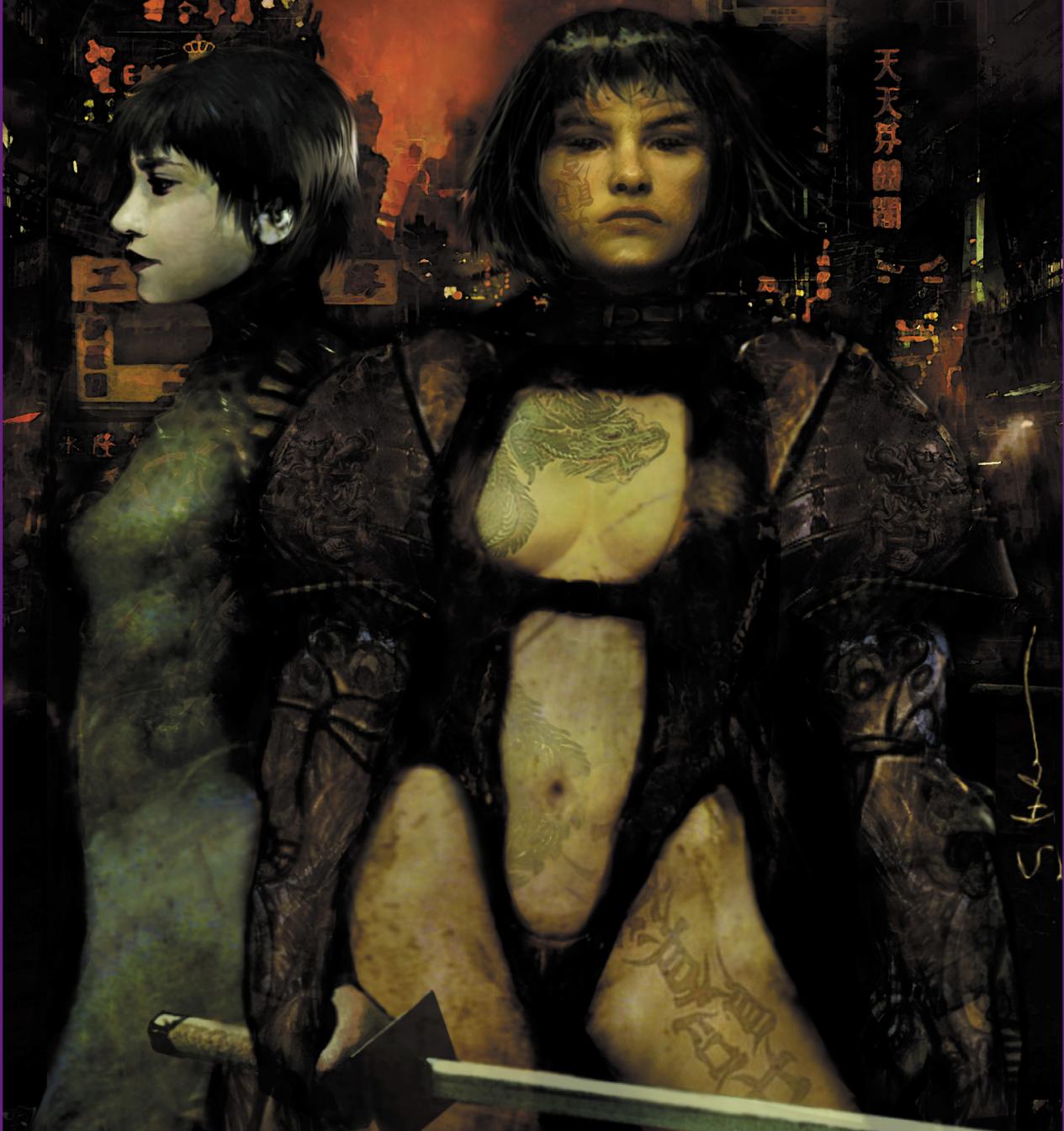


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DRAGONS of the EAST



THE SOURCEBOOK OF MYSTIC ASIA FOR IMAGE: THE ASCENSION®

DRAGONS of the East

TM



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INTRODUCTION



Mage has long acknowledged the influence of Asia, but never in the detail deserved by two billion people. To understand Asia's mages, you need a grounding in their history, their beliefs and their practices. *Dragons of the East* opens the door on these topics. With this volume, you have the tools to understand Asia's mages. They aren't just high-kicking martial artists or Confucian sages; such elements are simply pieces of the larger culture.

Ever since Marco Polo's fanciful tales of China filtered back to Europe, the denizens of the West have seen Asia through a veil of mystery and misunderstanding—and perhaps a little fear. Though diplomats and rulers from Europe scorned Asia as a backward, crumbling collection of petty kingdoms, the dizzying complexity of Chinese society and its inventions pro-

voked numerous superstitions. The Chinese invented gunpowder but used it only for firecrackers. They studied forms of war that allowed an unarmed man to kill armed attackers, yet preached nonviolence in concert with these techniques. The Asian mind was entirely foreign — of course — to the European attitudes of the day. Considering that the "Westerners" who studied Asia could hardly comprehend what Asian society took for granted, how much more mysterious were the elements that hid under the surface where the common man of Asia could not see them?

Of course, speaking in such broad terms is useless. There's no "Asia" any more than there's a "Europe" — geographical conventions, nothing more. What's true for a small part of China may be vastly different in another province and totally unknown in Laos. The underlying factor is that these cultures were *all* tremendously different from anything that Europe had

to offer. France, Spain and England all had kings, but in Asia, theocracy and Confucianism, warring states and “barbarian suppressing generals” made for a totally different social structure. In turn, the habits and superstitions of the people, in conjunction with their indigenous religions were a far cry from the Christian crusaders from Europe whose descendants went on to trade with Asia.

One can hardly talk about Asian societies on the same page with Europe. The Council of Nine forced the Akashic Brotherhood into the “Tradition” mold, and the Technocracy accepted their counterparts among the Five Metal Dragons, but neither group truly understood the mindset of its partners — because they never understood the history and society of their counterparts. That history is here.

The Chinese calendar stretches back over five thousand years; these people developed “civilized” innovations like the compass, gender equality and holistic living long before Europe dreamed up such wonders. Yet the very character of the civilization, so focused upon the greatness of the Middle Kingdom, brought a different attitude to discovery.

Among the supernatural side of Asian cultures are the Chi’n Ta, the Lightning People, the Dragons of the East — call them what you will, they are innovators and discoverers like their cousins in the West. But their discoveries carry an entirely different weight than those of their counterparts. They posit an entirely different structure of the world from the model shared by the Traditions. Those secrets, too, are here.

WHAT AWAITS

Without further ado, here’s a quick look at the mysteries revealed in **Dragons of the East**:

Chapter One: Ancient Scrolls discusses the development of culture and civilization in Asia. Here you’ll find the history of China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Cam-

bodia and their neighbors. Witness the development of magical society in conjunction with Asian civilization and some historical turning points that bear special notice in the World of Darkness.

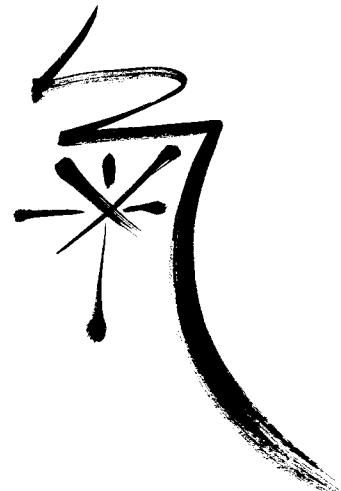
Chapter Two: Sutras explores the powerful forces of religion. Familiarize yourself with Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism or Hinduism; then see how to incorporate these beliefs when creating characters (Asian or otherwise) and ponder their effects upon mages.

Chapter Three: The Lightning People focuses upon the prominent Chi’n Ta of Asia: those families and houses foremost among magicians there. Discover the places where Akashic Brothers, Wu Lung and Wu-Keng developed, and how they’ve fared in the long struggle to the modern age.

Chapter Four: Bounteous Diversity turns to the other supernatural denizens of Asia. Some magical heritages remain hidden away in corners that the Traditions overlook. Descriptions and rules cover the various remaining disparate groups, or other mages whose existence has been hinted at but remain otherwise unknown. Here, too, are discussions of how mages deal with other creatures in the supernatural courts that mirror the structure of Heaven (or hell).

Chapter Five: Five Elemental Dragons looks in to the Asian Technocracy. While the Technocracy of Europe and the Americas encompasses a rational, scientific world, the Five Metal Dragons fuse high finance and bleeding-edge technology with traditions and rituals so ancient that they’ve become habit. Complete information for everything from the Dragon’s history to character creation.

Chapter Six: A Thousand Things of Magic, a Thousand Places of Power suggests some ideas for potent artifacts or locations that could be found throughout Asia. Incorporate these items into an existing chronicle or explore the legacies of important places where mages might congregate — or from which they might flee.





CHAPTER ONE: ANCIENT SCROLLS



The East's history runs deep, etched into everyday life and identity in a way that is sometimes difficult for outsiders to understand. The amazing thing is its continuity; there has never been a Dark Age to interrupt the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. True enough, empires have risen and fallen, but through it all, the people have never lost their connection to the most ancient events of their past. Communism couldn't erase four millennia of Chinese history and tradition, nor could attempted genocide separate the Khmer people from a pride in the mandala cities that remain standing despite the whirlwind of war and revolution in Cambodia.

Indeed, what couldn't be repressed with naked force is being attacked with a more insidious tool: cultural colonization. In Japan, Zen monks eat Big Macs on the steps of thousand-year-old temples; Baywatch episodes mutter Thai

and bathe bamboo houses in flickering TV light. This isn't always a bad thing, of course — a Western image, the Statue of Liberty, inspired the Goddess of Democracy, a symbol of the Tiananmen Square protests. The Middle Kingdom is transforming, and no matter what influences enter the mix, the roots of its culture endure, adapt and influence these changes.

These deep roots affect the Awakened as well, reminding them of a destiny that serves neither the Technocracy nor the Council of Nine Traditions. What this destiny is remains a mystery to all but the most enlightened, but it is theirs and not a footnote in the ambitions of Ascension's warriors.

Stories set in Asia must draw heavily upon the culture and history of the area. While these pages can provide an introduction, they are by no means complete. Storytellers should remember to look for specifics that may be important to their stories and conduct additional research. Especially important is a dive into the modern context of the culture: A historical look may provide some useful background, but the

blend of modern-day technological society with the ancient roots in Asia leads to some wonderful (and mind-boggling) admixtures.

HISTORY IN CONTEXT

Mages should be more dynamic than a long list of facts and dates — and they are. Still, mages are only human, and they come from human backgrounds. A mage who Awakens within an Asian culture will be more heavily colored by his country's thousands of years of history than by his few personal experiences as a mage, at least at first. Furthermore, many of the Crafts and Traditions retain keen memories of the past events that shaped their groups. A Japanese magician may draw inspiration not only from mystic styles, but from the culture of, say, the Meiji Era or the Warring States period; a Vietnamese mage could try to restore the former culture of his country or decide that it's best for Vietnam to embrace modern civilization because they can't shut out the world. Keep your character in mind as you read this chapter: Your Chinese mage should at least know the bare bones of Chinese history, just as much as any mage from the United States should recall the basics of the Revolutionary War or the signing of the Constitution.

The interesting spin comes from collisions of history with magic. A Chinese mage could well decide that Confucianism is a noble study, but how does he reconcile respect for family with the necessary secrecy of his magical practice? Some family members might accept that he talks to ghosts, while others consider him unbalanced or a threat to family security. The samurai ethic of Japan developed much like feudal knighthood in Europe, and even modern businessmen take much from the samurai code of bushido, but is there really room left in the world for swordsmen with no fear of death? The Japanese government didn't think so when it disbanded the samurai caste; a modern mage could hang on to such notions or grapple with rejecting them.

A mage's Avatar, too, may have something to say on the matter, if it recalls glory days in a past life. Any mage might find himself with hazy recollections of pivotal past events. Some memories might be colored by age or wishful thinking, while others could be memories of a life that the mage would rather forget — a brutal shaman, a prejudiced bureaucrat or

a similar existence that's difficult to reconcile with modern sensibilities. Take history not simply as a collection of events that are over and done, but rather as a long story with implications for the present.

EAST, WEST AND ELSEWHERE

This is a chapter about the history of the "Far East." The term is problematic, because it refers to a European way of dividing up the world. Any boundary we draw between East and West is an arbitrary one. In the real world, the "Orient" (a term that has fallen out of favor because of its racist connotations) once included Turkey and parts of modern Russia, but as Western conceptions change, the categories change with them. Viewed from the outside, the division can lead to misunderstandings. China, for example, has never thought of itself as an "Eastern" realm. It is Zhongguo, the Middle Kingdom, and the world is arrayed around it. Other Asian nations disagree with this viewpoint, to say the least. This leads us to another common fallacy: that Eastern society is one basic culture with a bunch of regional costumes. While they share certain influences (such as Buddhism), saying that Vietnam is like Japan is like saying that England is like Portugal, just because both came out of the Roman cultural legacy. China alone has more linguistic diversity than all of Western Europe.

In the World of Darkness, India represents "uncertain territory" between East and West. Akashic Brothers and Choristers rub shoulders here, as do vampires, oni and other, more sinister creatures. At the same time, India is one of the cradles of civilization, and has its own distinct voice; in *Mage*, the Cult of Ecstasy and Euthanatoi receive much of their inspiration from this land, ignoring the rule of "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Certainly, supernaturals in the Middle Kingdom present a more unified front than their Western counterparts. The Celestial Bureaucracy is a potent idea that has spread throughout the mundane and spirit worlds. On the other hand, a mutual duty doesn't imply understanding. Even if the will of Heaven dictates that Chinese and Korean mages must work together, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're later going to see eye to eye over tea.

INDIA



One of the cradles of civilization, India's history spans 5,000 years and encompasses some of humanity's finest intellectual and artistic achievements. Throughout its history, India has received visitors from both East and West; some, like the British, were unwelcome, but others have added to the diversity and depth of its identity. At the dawn of the 21st Century, India contains one

sixth of humanity within its borders; fierce debates about the nature of their common heritage punctuate daily life in the world's largest democracy.

CITIES OF CLAY AND BRONZE

Three thousand B.C. saw the dawn of Harrapa and Mohenjodaro — cities on the Indus that supported trade, agriculture and metalworking in gold, silver and bronze.

The Harrapan civilization spread throughout India, and its mercantile houses traveled as far as Persia.

The Harrapans had a class system divided according to occupation. Family seals adorned with deities distinguished different houses, and the cities of baked brick were planned to separate the classes by district. Little is known of their religion; while almost every home had a terra-cotta statue of the Earth Mother, and other deities are known through family crests and small figurines, no monumental sculpture survives. Starting in 1700 B.C., Harrapan culture spiraled into decline; climatic change flooded riverside settlements and left many farms to the encroaching desert. Legend holds that light skinned invaders crossed into India in 1500 B.C. through the Khyber Pass.

THE VEDIC AGE

The Aryans poured into India and rapidly colonized the northwest. Their cavalry easily outmatched the horseless Dravidian natives. Soon enough, the Aryan and Dravidian societies integrated. The Aryans adopted agriculture, and the lifestyle of the northern warrior camps evolved into the four jati (birth groups, or castes): brahmans (priest), kshatriyas (warrior), vaishyas (farmer), and shudras (worker). Originally flexible divisions of labor, the caste system became rigid and complex; eventually labor was assigned by birth and the four jati were divided into subgroups based on specific professions.

At first, the Aryans had no written language but supported an oral tradition. The Vedas, epic poems that established the foundations of Hinduism, were memorized by the highest jat, the brahmans.

The first three Vedas, the Rig, Sama and Yajur, include hymns to the gods and the rituals to honor them. The Atharva Veda is a repository of magical and medical knowledge, including treatises on the properties of herbs and chants to harm one's enemies.

Between 1000 and 800 B.C., the Mahabharata (Epic of India) and the Ramayana join the tradition of the Vedic canon. While the Aryan tongue, Sanskrit, eventually took on written form, it was still centuries before these sacred verses were written down. Still, with a written language and the perfection of chariot warfare, the stage was set for empire building.

SAINTS AND KINGS

Literate India became host to a number of religious and philosophical movements. By 600 B.C., Hinduism branched into a number of schools. Gurus questioned the foundations of belief and advocated new teachings. Jainism sprang from the teachings of the ascetic Mahavira, who preached a philosophy of austerity and nonviolence. The most dedicated Jains became ascetics, forswearing all possessions (sometimes including clothing). At the same time, Siddhartha Gautama proclaimed the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.

In the Third Century B.C., Chandragupta Maurya united most of India. The sciences flourished — mathematicians calculated pi, and scholars determined that the world was round and rotated on its axis. Chandragupta's grandson, Ashoka, converted to Buddhism and renounced conquest. The Mauryans drove out the Greek-speaking rulers of the northwest, eliminating the last vestiges of Alexander the Great's conquests.

Despite a popular and prosperous rule, Ashoka's empire didn't survive his death. India was divided into a number of smaller kingdoms until the fourth century A.D., when the Gupta dynasty came to power. The Guptas supported Hinduism and the arts flourished. Vishnu and Shiva gained popularity, and Buddhism declined until eventually the Buddha was regarded as an avatar of Vishnu.

ISLAM AND EUROPE

In A.D. 710, Muslims invasions along the Indus undermined Gupta supremacy; by 1000, these invasions destroyed it. While the south remained relatively peaceful, the north was wracked by war. By 1206, Qutb-ud-din had established the so-called Slave Dynasty. Early Muslim rulers began a massive effort to convert Hindus, building mosques on temple grounds and killing Brahmins and ascetics. In this turbulent period, many holy men sought to bridge the gap between Hindu and Islamic teaching. One of these, the guru Nanak, founded the Sikh religion in 1499, hailing Allah as the expression of Om, the universal vibration that brings man in harmony with spirit. Though Tamerlane massacred the Hindus of Delhi in the 14th Century, by the 16th century his Mughal descendants encouraged religious tolerance. The third Mughal emperor, Akbar, founded Din-e-Elahi, a religion that combined Hindu and Muslim precepts. The Mughals accepted Hindu nobility and built a special hall, Ibadhat Khana, to debate religious affairs.

After expanding their empire to the very tip of the subcontinent, the Mughal state declined. The Shah of Persia took Delhi in 1769. The best known legacy of the Mughals remains the Taj Mahal, built by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, to entomb his beloved wife.

During this time, several European nations acquired colonial territories. Malabar's spices enticed Vasco de Gama to brave the Cape of Good Hope and land there in 1498. Portugal established a colony at Goa, which became an infamous pirate haven as Europeans formed companies to harvest India's resources. The British East India Company emerged preeminent.

THE RAJ AND INDEPENDENCE

Originally, the East India Company directly controlled the Indian subcontinent. Farmers were forced to turn from subsistence crops to grow indigo, tea and other commercial crops. Combined with brutal taxation, this lead to widespread

famine. Constant rebellion, including a movement to reinstate Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal emperor, forced the company to turn control over to the British Crown in 1858.

The British raj couldn't administer such a huge territory without local cooperation, so they fostered a Western-educated elite to assist them. This new elite, with its knowledge of both India and the West, educated the common people about the colonial system and democratic values. The Freedom Movement used Western and Indian values to question the authority of the British Empire.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was the heir to this movement. A lawyer who had been imprisoned for his efforts to assist the Indian community in the south, he returned to India and took up the struggle against the British. Gandhi embraced traditional Indian culture and preached religious tolerance. He invented a form of nonviolent resistance that he called satyagraha, "moral domination."

Gandhi was eventually titled "Mahatma" for his reverence for the Indian way of life. His resolve to stand against the British was embodied by the Salt March, when in 1930, Gandhi and his followers walked 200 miles to the coastal town of Dandi to prepare salt in the traditional fashion that the British had outlawed. The Civil Disobedience Movement that followed was brutally repressed by colonial authorities. British morale and resources were strained to the breaking point; native support vanished when they chose to attack the peaceful and unarmed. Finally, the British agreed to withdraw. In 1947, British India split into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.

Today a nuclear power, India conducted nuclear tests that were quickly followed by Pakistan's own tests in 1998. Ideological differences and border disputes make for a tense relationship between the two states; with their weapons capability, the whole world watches.

CHINA



The impact of China on all of Asia can't be underestimated. As a cultural parent, it is to the East what Rome is to the West. The difference is that Rome is dead. A billion and a half souls, willing and unwilling, unite in a place as massive and diverse as continental Europe.

Freed from the humiliating treaties that leased Hong Kong and Macau, China prepares to play the capitalist game with the world. Communist orthodoxy has given way to the words of China's late leader, Deng Xiaoping: "To be rich is glorious." But wealth isn't freedom, and beneath those slogans lie the corpses of dissidents.

ORACLE BONES AND HEAVEN'S MANDATE

The Yellow River region holds some of the earliest evidence for human existence outside of Africa. The remains of early hominids indicate that humanity has lived in China for as long as we can define it human. China's prehistoric civilization is at least 5,000 years old; Chinese traditional history dates itself from a time in which myth and fact are inextricably woven. The Xia dynasty, said to have begun in 2100 B.C., was thought to be a myth, until discoveries in the 1960s and '70s found evidence of a Bronze Age culture in many of the cities spoken of in ancient records.

From 1766 to 1112 B.C., the Shang dynasty left the first evidence of a written language. Tortoiseshell and flat cattle bones were used in divination; the writing on these oracle bones indicates that the Shang believed in a form of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Their Shang-ti (Lord on High) was the ruler of a host of nature deities such as the sun, moon and rain. Shang religion included animal and possibly

human sacrifice; divination was common, using oracle bones (which were heated until cracks formed for analysis), yarrow sticks (which are still used with the *I Ching*) and shamanistic trance. The king was the "Son of Heaven," the intermediary between gods and humans.

Ancient records assert that the last Shang ruler, a despot by all accounts, was overthrown by the Chou tribe. The Chou established a capital at Huo, near Chang'an, and spread Shang culture throughout much of China. The Chou kingdom was quasi-feudal; the monarch ruled a decentralized collection of self-governing city-states. The Chou also introduced the idea of the "Mandate of Heaven," which asserted that the Chou ruled by divine right and could only be overthrown by the will of Heaven. In 771 B.C., barbarians who had allied with rebel lords sacked the capital. The capital was moved to Luoyang, and the kingdom fell into a decline called the Spring and Autumn period.

SPRING AND AUTUMN

While technically part of the Chou period, the Spring and Autumn period saw little centralized authority. This was not the start of a Dark Age but a flourishing of cultural accomplishment. Confucius, Lao-tzu and Sun-tzu all hailed from this time. Lords who wished to learn how to govern wisely and win decisively sponsored this burst of activity called the Hundred Schools. Competing warlords sponsored philosophers, poets and sword masters. Yin, Yang, and the theory of the Five Elements — the very tools that would influence science and sorcery throughout Asia — all date from this period. By 475 B.C., Chinese culture had acquired sophistication and ruthlessness, traits that were to be used to the fullest by Qin Shihuang.

HEAVEN'S CHOSEN

The first to unify China under a single ruler in 221 B.C., Qin followed a brutal Legalist mode: Subjects were enemies to be pacified. The Burning of the Books saw all knowledge that could weaken his authority repressed or destroyed. Confucian teachings were particularly despised, because they implied that the Mandate of Heaven could be seized by the common people. However, Qin's military ambitions and callous taxation fueled the construction of dams and fortifications, including the Great Wall. Naming himself Huang-ti after the legendary Yellow Emperor, he became obsessed with finding the secrets of immortality. The architects of his tomb were buried with him, and thousands of years passed before archaeologists discovered the terra cotta warriors and corpses he planned to rule after death.

After four years of civil war, the Han dynasty took control, reviving Confucianism and adopting it as the state ethos. Civil examinations allowed any educated man to receive an imperial appointment. The Han dynasty also saw the invention of paper and porcelain; the adventures of generals and explorers established the Silk Road, generating trade between China and Rome. By the time the Han government collapsed in A.D. 220, it had established the structure that China would follow for the next 1,700 years. The Han tribe

became synonymous with Chinese culture; even today, non-Han traditions and languages are often marginalized.

After the fall of the Han, China fragmented into rival states; the kingdoms of Wei, Shu, and Wu, enjoyed successive, fleeting dominance. The Chinese remember this time as an age of romance and heroism when scholar-warriors wandered the land. Gunpowder was invented (but was mainly used for fireworks), and astronomy and medicine flourished.

Two dynasties, the Jin (A.D. 265-420) and Wu (A.D. 581-617) briefly united the country and rivaled the reign of Qin in ruthlessness. Buddhism grew in popularity, adapting to Chinese culture. The Emperor Wu Ti entertained Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism and exempted monasteries from taxation and military service.

In 618, the Tang dynasty took hold of the nation. A high point in Chinese civilization, the Tang period saw the invention of block printing. The model Tang citizen was the "universal man," who combined academic, martial and poetic skills. The imperial examination was perfected, and civilian scholar-officials gradually replaced the nobility. Their successors, the Song, enjoyed a burgeoning middle class of wealthy artisans and traders. Song Neo-Confucianism became increasingly rigid, emphasizing duty over reciprocity.



In 1279, the Song fell to the Mongols commanded by Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai. The foreign Yuan dynasty retained Confucian civil officials but introduced freedom of religion. Shamanism, Islam, Catholicism and Nestorian Christianity blended with Chinese faiths. Kublai Khan entertained Marco Polo. Visitors from the West brought new musical instruments and crops, and returned with medical knowledge, printing techniques and playing cards. The capital moved to Beijing.

After Kublai died, peasant revolts and squabbling among his heirs and brought down the Yuan dynasty. The Chinese reasserted themselves with the first Ming ruler in 1368.

MING AND QING

Founded by a former Buddhist monk and peasant general, the Ming ("Brilliant") dynasty grafted itself onto the bureaucracy that had endured since Han times. At first, the Ming sponsored naval exploration, sailing as far as Africa. But in 1433, these voyages suddenly stopped. Ming society, controlled by an increasingly conservative civil bureaucracy, transformed into an insular agrarian society, giving up control of the Indian Ocean and substituting expansion for tribute from nearby kingdoms such as Annam (Vietnam). Ming China believed that it was the most advanced society possible and could gain nothing from its foreign inferiors. Finally, weakened by war with the Mongols and bureaucratic corruption, China was invaded by the Manchu Qing in 1644.

As foreign conquerors, the Qing met heavy resistance. The Manchus had already absorbed much of Chinese culture, but their language and dress (including the *sawk*, a men's hairstyle consisting of a shaved pate and a long single braid) set them apart from their Han subjects. The Qing exacerbated this by forbidding intermarriage with the Han and instituting a system of dual officials wherein Han civil servants were at the mercy of their Manchu counterparts.

The Manchus continued their conquests, capturing all the territory of modern China and establishing Tibet as a protectorate (which later gave communist successors a pretense for invasion).

China's population had swelled to 300 million by the 19th century. Unclaimed farmland grew scarce, and surplus laborers turned to banditry or starved. The Triads, White Lotus Society and local warlords all chipped away at Qing power. China was ill prepared for the arrival of the European powers.

At first, the Qing accepted the Portuguese, British and French the way they would any other tributary state; the idea that these nations wanted to negotiate on equal footing was unthinkable. The British responded by importing opium to China against imperial decree. When Chinese officials burned British opium, the British launched a punitive expedition, leading to the Opium War of 1839. In 1842, the Treaty of Nanking ceded Hong Kong to British occupation (and, by 1898, outright rule), and humiliating trade and legal concessions put the British above imperial law. The Taip-

THE TRIADS: HEAVEN'S SECRET ARITY

The Triads tie their origins to the Manchu invasion. Ascribing their origins to refugees from the Shaolin Temple, they originally organized resistance against the Qing. These secret societies hold an ambivalent place in Chinese culture even today; while extortion and other crimes have been practiced since the Triads' genesis, they also support the very communities that pay them protection, making large contributions to community centers and supporting local businesses. Because of their origins, the Triads support martial arts schools, and Triad rituals often include martial arts routines.

Triad initiations are a combination of Buddhist and Confucian rites. The prospective member arrives in a traditional, collarless costume (the collar is seen as a symbol of slavery) and lights a blue lantern to honor the founding ancestors of the organization. The initiate swears an oath of secrecy and vows to overthrow foreign domination. A Buddhist monk often blesses him.

The new member is a *sidai*, or "younger brother." Triads use familial titles such as *sihing* (elder brother) and *sifu* (father); exceptions are the snakeheads and dragonheads, who lead local and international initiatives, and the dreaded red poles, Triad enforcers. Some members have tattoos on their neck and shoulders, but these designs aren't as elaborate as the body art of the Yakuza.

Today, Triads are infamous for their forays into drug and arms trafficking and their influence over the Hong Kong film industry. Many Triad members still train in the martial arts out of tradition rather than pragmatism, although a Triad hit in which a sword was used still makes the papers from time to time.

ing and Boxer Rebellions in 1851 and 1900 were followed by more Qing concessions, until China was known as the "Weak Man of Asia."

THE LAST EMPEROR AND THE LITTLE RED BOOK

The Chinese had suffered enough. Sun Yat-sen laid the foundations for a republican revolution, touring Japan and the United States to raise money for the cause. By 1911, most of China's provinces had seceded from the imperial government. By 1912, the Chinese Republic formed under Yuan Shikai, and the last emperor, Puyi, had officially abdicated. Yuan revised the constitution, granting himself dictatorial powers and assassinating enemies who opposed the Kuomintang. Formally elected by an intimidated parliament, Yuan eventually declared himself president for life and talked of making himself emperor. When he died in 1916, even his closest lieutenants had deserted him.

Japan controlled Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, and China was divided into Sun Yat-sen's southern Kuomintang nationalists and the warlords of the north. After Sun died in 1925, the Kuomintang's communist ties split the party into left and right wing factions. The communists eventually supported armed rebellion against both the warlords and the nationalists. In 1934, Mao Zedong lead 100,000 people 7,500 miles in the Long March to flee the Kuomintang, cementing his leadership of the communist movement.

In 1931, hostilities between the communists and nationalists ceased so that both factions could oppose the Japanese invasion. The Red Army grew popular with the people because, unlike the Kuomintang, they paid for everything they took. When their alliance broke down in 1938, the communists had the upper hand; by 1949, their popular support allowed them to expel their rivals from the mainland. The Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan, and the communists founded the People's Republic of China.

The Great Leap Forward, an attempt to collectivize industry and strengthen China's economic infrastructure, led to widespread famine and destroyed Mao's reputation. In 1965, he attempted to regain power by starting the Cultural

Revolution; the youth of the Red Guard revered Maoist thought and deposed his enemies.

After Mao's death in 1976, certain dissidents like Deng Xiaoping arose as China's new leaders. The new communists grudgingly promoted something of a free market, partially in preparation for the return of Hong Kong (in 1997) and Macau (in 2000). But economic liberalization didn't guarantee freedom. When a million people gathered in Tiananmen Square to demand Chinese democracy in May of 1989, the government responded with force. On June 3, hundreds, if not thousands, were killed when the Red Army stormed the Forbidden City.

In the 21st century, China prepares to emerge as the next global superpower. Western nations court expanded trade and commercial access, often ignoring China's stained human rights record. One barrier to such trade is digital piracy; the computer age and China's notorious disregard for copyright combine to make the country a haven for black market software, music and films. As China's population swells, unemployment rises and resources dwindle. Away from big cities like Shanghai, few benefit from the new capitalism.

TIBET



Tradition holds that Tibet is the land of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. In the form of an ape, the Lord of Compassion mated with a rock demon, an emanation of the goddess Tara, bringing forth the Tibetan people. According to legend, the first ruler of Tibet was the Indian king Rupati. Twelve Bon priests enthroned King Rupati and named him Nyatari Tsenpo. The first kings, it was said, had a cord connecting them to heaven; later rulers severed the cord by waging war.

Bon, Tibet's indigenous religion, was a shamanistic faith that emphasized guiding the souls of the dead. Bon traces its mythic origin to Shambhala, a divine kingdom hidden in the mountains. Several early kings searched for this heaven on earth; one, Gesar of Ling, is said to have found it.

To the Chinese, Tibet was Jian or Xizang, a nation of goat herders and fierce warriors who periodically encroached on Chinese soil. Xizang's influence expanded as far as the Silk Road during the Han period. With both states evenly matched, only long, bitter wars won back the Tang Empire's lucrative trade route.

THE LIVING BUDDHAS

In A.D. 174, Buddhism became Tibet's state religion. Early conflicts between Bon and Buddhism were verbal rather

than physical battle. Over time, the two faiths intermingled—great teachers such as Padmasambhava and Milarepa taught the principles of Vajrayana Buddhism. Their doctrine emphasized Tibetan gods and magic, merging them with what was said to be the Buddha's secret teachings. These evolved into the four schools of Buddhist teaching: the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug, the school of the Dalai Lama.

With the arrival of the Mongols in China, the power of the Buddhist clergy grew enormously. Kublai Khan considered Tibet to be the temple of his empire. Thus, he granted control of the state of the lamas, and promoted Tibetan Buddhism in Yuan China. This relationship served as the model for Tibetan relations with the outside world. By 1578, the Gelug sect had amassed enough power to dominate the nation. A neighboring Mongol ruler dubbed the head of the sect the Dalai Lama, or "Ocean of Wisdom." Considered an emanation of Avalokitesvara himself, the Dalai Lama became the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet.

In the 15th Century, the fifth Dalai Lama founded Tibet's theocracy, ruling in concert with the Karmapa and Panchen lamas. The nobility formed an assembly of advisors, the Keshag, with both a secular and a religious official filling each administrative post. The Dalai Lama's most unusual advisor, though, remains Nechung. Nechung is the guardian deity of Tibet, who manifests through a kuten, or medium. Nechung has his own monastery and is considered to be the

manifestation of a buddha, as opposed to the worldly spirits that are tied to Bon beliefs.

While the Ming were content to accept tribute from Tibet, the Qing conquered the country outright, creating China's justification for invasion in the 20th century. Revolts against Qing troops and the decline of the dynasty's fortunes returned de facto rule to the Dalai Lama, who pursued a policy of isolation. Tibet's capital, Lhasa, was forbidden to foreigners.

A SCARLET FLAG IN THE SNOW

From 1911 to 1951 Tibet had little contact with China or the rest of the world. After the communist revolution, China sent officials who decried Tibet's theocratic, feudal regime. In 1950, the Red Army invaded and crushed Tibet's primitively armed 5,000-strong army. Chinese troops sent

religious statuary to be smelted down for valuable metals and destroyed monasteries. Monks were imprisoned, tortured, and executed by the military regime. The 14th Dalai Lama fled the country in 1959 along a route chosen by Nechung. He went on to establish a government in exile in Dharamsala, India.

Since that time, the Chinese government has strictly controlled Buddhism in Tibet. When the Panchen Lama was recognized by the Dalai Lama, the child was placed under house arrest, and a state-approved replacement took his post. The Karmapa Lama, the only other lama that can recognize a new Dalai Lama (a critical issue as the 14th Dalai Lama ages) fled Tibet for Dharamsala in January 2000. Relations between the exiled Tibetan government and China have improved, but the fundamental claim of the Dalai Lama's supporters — that Tibetans are not Chinese — is still rejected by Beijing.

SOUTHEAST ASIA: PATHS IN THE JUNGLE



VIETNAM

Vietnamese tradition speaks of the ancient kingdom of Van Lang, ruled for thousands of years by semi-divine monarchs. The descendants of the people of Van Lang are said to have founded Au Lac, the first historical kingdom in the Red River Delta. The early Vietnamese may have been the first in East Asia to practice agriculture; by the first century B.C., Au Lac had developed a sophisticated bronze-working culture.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE EAST

Vietnam's encounter with the United States was just one episode of a history of resistance and revolution. The first invaders were the Chinese. In 111 B.C., Au Lac was conquered by the Han Empire. Chinese customs and the Confucian bureaucracy were introduced in the face of fierce opposition. In A.D. 39, the Trung sisters led a successful rebellion against the Chinese. The eldest, Trung Trac, ruled an independent kingdom until Chinese armies returned in A.D. 43.

For nearly a thousand years, the Vietnamese struggled against Chinese rule. In 939, Ngo Quyen defeated the armies of the crumbling Tang dynasty, but the nation he created didn't survive his death. In 1010, the native Ly dynasty reunited the nation. Ironically, the influence of Chinese rule shaped the Ly government, relying on state examinations to select a bureaucratic elite. However, the "smaller dragon" continued to revere the Trung sisters and other heroes created by the struggle against Chinese domination.

In the 13th Century, Kublai Khan attempted to incorporate Vietnam into the Yuan Empire, but his troops were beaten back. The next 200 years saw Vietnam expand into

Champa and Khmer territory, seizing much of the neighboring Mekong Delta. But as the nation expanded, it fragmented. After throwing off a short-lived Ming regime, the Ly dynasty split into the Trinh and Nguyen clans. While the Trinh were ascendant, the Nguyen were granted a fief in the south, splitting the country in two.

THE STRUGGLE WITH THE WEST

In 1802, French missionaries helped Nguyen Anh to seize power from the crumbling Tay Son peasant govern-

THE NAGA KINGS

Legends trace Southeast Asia's royalty to the Naga, serpent people and keepers of ancient secrets. Cambodian myth recalls the union of a Brahmin priest and Naga queen; he taught the ways of the gods to the royal family, and she the primordial ways of the jungle. Her people were said to advise the rulers of Angkor Wat, and keep mortal princes as their consorts. The mark of the Naga was there for all to see: Their tracks in the jungle were the riverbeds of the Mekong Delta.

The Nagah, shapeshifters and kin to the Middle Dragons, still haunt the ruins of mandala cities and temples in India and Southeast Asia. Many Chi'n Ta assume that the wereserpents are the creatures mentioned in these legends. Those that know the ancient agreements between humans and snakes seek them out, offering their bodies in exchange for buried secrets. The few that return are plagued with madness or forgetfulness — or are gifted with mystical knowledge that rarely seems to compensate for the haunted expressions they carry with them thereafter.

ment. However, the Emperor was suspicious of the motives of the French, and in the 1830s he orchestrated the persecution of the French and Catholics in Vietnam. From 1858 to 1882, the French responded with military force until the government in Hue agreed to French colonial rule.

In 1940, Japan occupied Vietnam, reducing French authority to a formality. Led by Ho Chi Minh, the communist Vietminh independence movement established a capital at Hanoi in 1945. The French refused to recognize Vietnamese independence, supporting the Nguyen monarchy in the south. When the Vietminh defeated them at Dien Ben Phu in 1954, the French agreed to a treaty dividing the country along the 17th parallel. The Vietminh abided by the terms of the treaty until 1959, when president Ngo Dimh Diemh's government, plagued by Catholic chauvinism and despotism (he refused to hold elections), created an opportunity for invasion. In 1963, Diemh's own generals killed him in a coup d'etat backed by the United States.

In 1965, the U.S. sent combat troops and bombers to engage the communists. After the disastrous Tet Offensive in 1968, the U.S. decided to negotiate a peace. In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords put a temporary halt to the war in preparation for elections, but negotiations soon collapsed. In 1975, North Vietnamese troops seized Saigon (later renamed Ho Chi Minh City). The new People's Republic of Vietnam sent troops into Laos and Cambodia, and warred with China.

Since 1990, Vietnam has attempted to improve its relations with the United States and liberalize its economy. Still, the war remains a vivid memory to the Vietnamese; ruined buildings and twisted, rusting war machines are kept as monuments to the horror of the war.

LAOS

By the first century A.D., the Ban Chiang civilization had organized into several city-states, called mandalas — centers of political power built according to Hindu and Buddhist mystical designs; each was a diagram of the universe showing the place of the gods and mortals that dwelt within.

One of these mandalas, Muang Sua, became a nexus of political power for the Laotian people. By A.D. 689, the city had become a tempting enough prize to lure Thai conquerors. The empires of the Khmer, Thais and Vietnamese contended for the mandala, until in 1286, Laotians under the command of Panya Lang took the city. This victory was short lived; by the 13th Century, The Yuan swept through Laos with their Thai allies. Thai Mongol rule was not oppressive, and soon enough Lao troops harassed the Vietnamese on behalf of Kublai Khan's empire. However, the Vajrayana Buddhism espoused by their new rulers was extremely unpopular. Lao rulers in the kingdom of Lang Xang ended their alliance with the Mongols in 1398.

THE RIVER OF WAR

Lang Xang fell in 1690, and the Thai laid claim to its remains. By the 19th century, French excursions into the Mekong threatened Siamese sovereignty. In 1893, French gunboats forced Siam to hand over their territories. In doing so, they created a colony that reunited the territories of Lang Xang.

The nationalism engendered by this act served the French well in 1940, when De Gaulle's provisional government trained Laotian guerillas to harass the Japanese in Vietnam. However, by 1944, the Vietminh movement had found a counterpart in Laos — the Pathet Lao. Although it was originally a nonpartisan group, the Vietminh encouraged the growth of a communist cell inside it; by the mid-'50s, secret communists dictated Pathet Lao policies. In 1958, the Vietminh "influence" escalated into a full-scale occupation. During the Vietnam War, the Ho Chi Minh Trail cut through Laos to supply the front. Through the C.I.A., the U.S. recruited a hill tribe, the Hmong, to act as guerillas, supplying them with airdrops from unmarked military planes. Indiscriminate bombing was used to hinder hidden supply lines and reinforcements. The devastation claimed ancient temples and farmland in Laos.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Pathet Lao began to eliminate opponents and moderates. "Seminar Camps" combined indoctrination with forced labor. At Camp 01, political enemies and the last of the hereditary nobility were starved or beaten to death. Buddhism was put under state control; sermons were prerecorded and vetted by the government.

CAMBODIA

Heavily influenced by Indian culture, the Khmer adopted Hindu gods, mandala cities, and a language that evolved from Sanskrit. From the Mekong city-state of Funan, the Khmer expanded into an empire that stretched from Burma to the South China Sea. The Angkor period, from the 9th to 12th centuries, brought enough tribute to build Angkor Wat, the world's largest temple.

Pressure from Siam and Vietnam, as well as the influence of French missionaries, weakened the Khmer state until, like Vietnam and Laos, it was forced to submit to French rule in 1863. World War Two saw the humiliation of the French by the Japanese, and Cambodia fought for independence until, in 1953, colonial rule was lifted and King Norodom Sihanouk became head of state.

THE YEAR ZERO

In 1970, Sihanouk was ousted by Lon Nol, one of his generals. His reign was brief; in 1975 the Khmer Rouge toppled the military government. The Khmer Rouge advocated a form of agrarian communism and emptied every major population center to fuel concentration camp "farms." King Sihanouk was placed under house arrest in his deserted capital.

Two million people died in the next four years. Under Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge claimed the state was infallible and rejected heavy industry, modern medicine and personal freedoms. Overwork and starvation claimed those too weak to work the fields. The rest were tortured and executed for crimes such as having wealthy parents or speaking a foreign language.

In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Its troops remained until 1989, when an independent Cambodia appealed to the U.N. for assistance in the face of Khmer Rouge guerillas. In 1993 and 1998 the U.N. supervised elections, and King Sihanouk returned to head a constitutional monarchy.

THAILAND

In 1238, two Thai chieftains led a revolt against the Khmer Empire, establishing the first independent Thai state, Sukhothai ("Dawn of Happiness"). The nascent Thai culture blossomed with the invention of the Thai writing system and native schools of painting and sculpture. Like the Khmer, the Thai were heavily influenced by Indian culture. The greatest king of the Sukhothai, Ram Kamhaeng, introduced Theravada Buddhism to the country. In emulation of the Indian monarch Ashoka, the king heavily supported the Buddhist clergy and rejected expansionism. Ram Kamhaeng's paternalistic rule wasn't emulated after he died, though — a series of weak kings made concessions to neighboring Ayutthaya, which finally absorbed Sukhothai in 1438.

The Ayutthaya monarchs rejected the parent-child relationship between the ruler and subject. Instead, the Thai people were considered property of the Ayutthaya royal family. A strong, centralized and expansionist state, the Ayutthaya eradicated the last pockets of Khmer influence, unifying Siam. Siam continued as a strong monarchy, but, as with

most such aggressive hereditary systems, suffered intermittent difficulty with foreign powers. In 1516, Siam and Portugal signed a treaty that exchanged firearms for trade. Unfortunately, these new weapons were insufficient to stop the Burmese, who conquered the country in 1569.

However, the use of the royal family as puppet monarchs proved to be Burma's undoing. In 1584, Crown Prince Naresuan took his soldiers out of the service of the Burmese and used them to fight for independence. Siam emerged victorious in January 1593 when Naresuan slew the Burmese prince in a duel on elephants.

WESTERN INTERESTS

Over the next hundred years, the Spanish, Dutch and English signed trade agreements with Siam. Sporadic conflicts with the British East India Company and the Dutch were balanced by friendly relations with the French, who sent missionaries to Siam in 1662. The real surprise came from a Greek adventurer, Constantine Phaulkon, who rose rapidly through the Thai nobility, acting as an advocate against the British. As an ally of the French, he was hated by Siamese nationalists, who seized the throne and had him beheaded in 1688. The new government routed French soldiers in Bangkok and expelled most foreigners.

In the 19th century the dynasty of the Rama family reformed Siamese law and expanded the country's borders, conquering Chiang Mai and subjugating Cambodia. Treaties with the U.S. and Britain broke down when the Western powers demanded the special privileges they were accorded

in China. A British blockade forced concessions.

By the 1900s, Siam was also forced to cede territory



to France, who occupied neighboring Vietnam, to retain its independence.

In 1932, a revolution allowed the People's Party of Thailand to form a new government and reduce the monarchy to a constitutional role. A series of revolts and counterrevolts caused King Rama VII to voluntarily exile himself to England. His successor, Rama VIII, pounced on France's weak presence in 1940 to regain the ceded territories. The pro-Japanese regime declared war on the Allies, but their envoy refused to deliver the declaration to England. In 1946, the declaration of war was nullified by the Thai government and the U.S.

State Department, recognizing Thailand as a neutral party in the war.

Modern Thailand's government has been run by the military since then. Theravada Buddhism maintains a powerful influence on the country, with some monks becoming political power brokers or celebrities comparable to Western rock stars. Bangkok's wealth and infamy have grown in concert; the bright lights and fancy sets of Hong Kong filmmakers contrast with sex tourists and the "bargirls," who often come to the city to support rural families while still children.

JAPAN



Japan sits at a crossroads in its history. Rampant capitalism has given way to a re-evaluation of traditional culture. The corporations that made the West tremble have abandoned their commitment to lifetime employment, and in turn disillusionment and anger have replaced the famous sarariman loyalty. Many Japanese look to the past for guidance; behind the punishing work ethic that has driven the nation for over five decades is a legacy that combines beauty, heroism and a love for the land and its people.

SHAMAN QUEENS AND POTTERY SHARDS

The oldest signs of human habitation in Japan date from about 8000 B.C.; little is known about the Jomon people (named after the pottery they left behind) and whether they were the precursors to the modern Japanese, the Ainu, or another group yet to be traced. In 300 B.C., the Yayoi (also named after their pottery) appeared in Chinese accounts of the Japanese archipelago. Tribal queens who intercede on behalf of their subjects with ghosts and spirits were said to rule. The introduction of rice and iron allowed the nascent Japanese to band together behind powerful chieftains and landowners, emerging from these tribal roots. By A.D. 400, the Yamato dynasty united central Japan (although its first emperor, Jimmu Tenno, is said to have been born in 660 B.C.), although the powerful Soga clan limited imperial power to Shinto ritual. Chinese writing, political thought, and Buddhism were all introduced to Japan by the 6th century.

NARA AND HEIAN

In A.D. 710, the first permanent Japanese capital was established at Nara. Chinese influences were gradually incorporated into the Japanese identity. Buddhism and the imperial government were adapted to serve the unique needs of the people, and literature flourished after the invention of Kana syllables allowed representation of the language in

JAPANESE ORIGINS

Early Japanese history is all the more mysterious because of the political issues surrounding it. While there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the precursors to the modern Japanese migrated from the Korean Peninsula, this theory is much less popular in Japan than tracing their descent from the Jomon potters. Shinto mythology and popular sentiment link the people to the land from its very creation, and lingering animosity between Japan and Korea makes it tempting to dismiss any common ancestry.

Adding to this confusion is the question of the Ainu. Japan's aboriginal people now inhabit the northernmost island of Hokkaido, but once ranged over most of the islands. The Ainu have a matriarchal, shamanistic society and come from a different ethnic stock than the Japanese. Many scholars credit them for the Jomon culture, and for similarities between Ainu tradition and Chinese records of the shaman-queens of old.

Whatever the academic and political conflicts surrounding Japanese prehistory, the sophisticated artifacts left by the Jomon and Yayoi make it a mystery worth solving.

its native form. In 794, the capital moved to Kyoto, where it stayed for over a thousand years.

However, the newly centralized regime imposed severe taxes; soon, ownership of the land passed to a powerful elite who undermined imperial power. One of these clans, the Fujiwara, intermarried with the imperial line, dominating state affairs. In response, other fiefdoms retained warriors to serve their interests against the Fujiwara and each other; these samurai quickly evolved from a farmer militia into professional soldiers.

TWO CLANS, ONE RULER

In 1068, the Emperor Go-Sanjo, who was determined to rule the country himself, thwarted the Fujiwara. In 1086,

he abdicated but continued to rule from the shadows. The Insei system of “retired” rulers controlled Japan until the 12th century.

In the meantime, two great clans steadily acquired strength. The Minamoto (or Genji) and Taira (or Heike) families were destined to clash for control of the nation. The Taira took the place of the Fujiwara in imperial politics, while the battle-hardened Minamoto conquered Honshu in a brutal military campaign. In 1156, Taira Kiyamori’s forces defeated the Minamoto; survivors hid in the mountains or fled Japan for the Ryukyus. According to legend, Minamoto Yoshitsune learned magical and martial skills from the Tengu during his exile. These served him well during the Gempei War (1180-85) when the Minamoto clan regrouped and utterly destroyed the Taira. The last Heike, a small boy, died at sea; it is said that the spirits of his retainers live in crabs whose shells, to this day, sport the faces of scowling samurai.

In 1192 the Emperor gave Minamoto Yoritomo the title of shogun, or “barbarian suppressing general.” In 1274, an emissary from Kublai Khan demanded Japan’s unconditional surrender to the Mongols. The emissary was executed, and the Japanese repulsed two invasions; during the second, in 1281, a kamikaze, or “divine wind” (a massive tidal wave) annihilated four fifths of the invasion fleet. The military government lasted until 1333.

In 1334, Emperor Go-Daigo overthrew the Kamakura government, but his general, Ashikaga Takauji, turned on him and captured Kyoto, putting a puppet emperor on the throne. Go-Daigo fled south, to Yoshino. By the end of the ensuing conflict, the Ashikaga Shogunate had lost control of the outer provinces. As Ashikaga authority dwindled in the 14th and 15th centuries, local rulers from the samurai class called ji-samurai and daimyo, governed a feudal patchwork with little regard for the bakufu or the imperial court. Incessant strife between the daimyo grew into the sengoku jidai, the time of civil war.

CIVIL WAR

The 16th century introduced European trade and Christianity to Japan. Jesuit missionaries and firearms flooded into Japan. Christianity rapidly grew popular despite Buddhist opposition and persecution. One convert, Oda Nobunaga, used his baptism as a way to gain access to firearms and Portuguese tacticians. Briefly, Japan saw the horrific transformation that had once gripped Europe as armored warriors were cut down by peasant riflemen. Oda cut a bloody swath through Japan until he was assassinated by ninja at the Honnoji Temple in 1582. The man behind the plot, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, finished Oda’s work, unifying the country. Unable to secure the rank of shogun, Toyotomi confiscated the weapons of clergy and commoners in the Sword Hunt to prevent rebellion.

He had planned for his son, Hideyori, to inherit the nation after his death, but by 1600, the battle lines were

drawn again. One daimyo, Tokugawa Ieyasu, turned against the Toyotomi regime. In response, Toyotomi Hideyori and the massed warlords of Japan met him at the Battle of Sekigahara. Although Tokugawa’s Eastern Army was smaller, he was a brilliant tactician and had bribed several key generals on the other side. Toyotomi’s Western Army was scattered to the four winds. In 1603, Tokugawa became shogun.

THE TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE: PEACE AND ISOLATION

Tokugawa’s capital, Edo, was more than a gesture of triumph. By forcing the nobility to live in the city, Tokugawa acquired hostages with which to discourage a rebellion. He solidified his control by destroying the remnants of the Toyotomi clan and persecuting Christians for treason; in a macabre irony, the standard punishment for this crime was crucifixion. The third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, eradicated the Christian rebels of Shimabara in 1637, ending Japanese Christianity for the rest of the Tokugawa period.

The Tokugawa bakufu saw a flowering of traditional culture. Tea ceremony, flower arranging and poetry changed from the rushed hobbies of a few to artistic skills expected of a samurai of breeding. Firearms were banned, and without the constant pressure of war, martial skills were refined (some would argue bastardized) into martial arts. One of the earliest of the new generation of shugyosha, or student warriors, was Miyamoto Musashi. Musashi was as famous for his “two heavens” technique. Musashi simultaneously shunned the sophistications of honor or artistry but also waxed poetic and pragmatic in his analysis of combat. Martial artists and executives today study his *Book of Five Rings* to perfect their strategic skills.

Many samurai were ready to teach their skills because, in a country at peace, there was no work for them to do. If their masters had died they became ronin, “wave men.” Ronin were a serious social problem; many turned to banditry or gambling, and armed, drunken ronin inspired a whole body of techniques designed to restrain a swordsman. As a result, samurai skills flourished, and the samurai developed their own sort of subculture. The lack of war gave samurai time to hone their disciplines in many areas, and bred a culture that worshipped its warrior origins. Simultaneously, those samurai who could not adapt to their class as a new nobility became shadows of their former selves, much like the robber-knights contrasted the chivalry of Europe’s Dark Ages.

Neo-Confucianism made Tokugawa society more rigid and stratified. Commoners were forbidden to carry the katana or wear certain textiles. Women who were blooded warriors during the sengoku jidai had daughters who weren’t allowed to leave their homes. Merchants were despised for protecting nothing and producing nothing; edicts were passed in vain to restrict their influence. Even ninja were incorporated into

the Tokugawa system; the Koga clan became the Onmitsu, a spy network for the shogun.

Trade with the West ceased. Foreigners were prohibited from setting foot on Japanese soil; even the few Dutch that sailed to Japan couldn't leave the island that had been reserved for their use. New technologies were ignored; the government owned all rifles and made no attempt to improve the design introduced by the Portuguese. So Tokugawa society persisted, stable and static, for over 250 years, until the sharp report of a cannon roused them from isolation.

MEIJI: THE FALL OF THE SAMURAI

In 1852, Commodore Matthew Perry arrived on a mission from the U.S. to open Japan up for trade. With ironclads and cannons, he easily forced his way into Tokyo harbor. The resulting trade agreements were very unfavorable to Japan.

Two clans, the Satsuma and Choshu, brought support to Emperor Meiji in a bid to regain control of the country. The pro-imperial movement became hugely popular as a protest against Tokugawa's mismanagement in the face of Western power. Equipping themselves with modern weaponry, the Satsuma and Choshu rapidly conquered the country for the Emperor; by 1867, imperial forces occupied Kyoto, and the Emperor was returned to power.

The Meiji Restoration was a radical period of Westernization. The samurai class was abolished; wearing two swords and the topknot became illegal. The imperial household's members styled themselves after Western monarchies, and the kimono was replaced by the dour attire of early 20th century Europe. Martial arts were also affected by the changes; Gichin Funakoshi and Jigoro Kano revised the techniques of karate-jutsu and jujutsu to conform to the newly Westernized education system, creating karate-do and judo. Kendo was standardized as well, and all three arts were taught alongside Western gymnastics.

Power briefly shifted from the imperial clique to an elected parliament. But victories against China in 1895 and Russia in 1905 strengthened the position of the military; with the occupation of Korea in 1910, the army began to dictate government policy. A global economic downturn and the Kanto Earthquake of 1923 provided ample opportunity to step into the chaos and rule the country. With the help of propaganda, censorship, and select assassinations, the military seized power by 1930.

WORLD WAR TWO TO THE PRESENT

Japan began a campaign of aggressive expansion, occupying Manchuria in 1931 and provoking the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. The Rape of Nanking would go down as one of the greatest atrocities of Japanese imperialism,

as civilians were tortured, raped and murdered by the invaders. By 1940, Japan's puppet states were organized into the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. As many of these were Western colonial holdings, the British and American governments responded with an oil embargo. The Japanese decided to expand and attacked Dutch Indonesia to forestall a fuel crisis even at the risk of war with the Allies.

On December 6th, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The next year saw Japanese conquests from the Pacific to the border of India. However, after the Battle of Midway in 1942, the Japanese Army was gradually beaten back and confined to its national borders. By 1944, the islands were punished with heavy bombing, and in 1945, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed with atomic bombs. Ironically, some of the victims of Nagasaki had fled there

OKINAWA

Okinawa, largest of the Ryukyu Islands, was originally composed of the kingdoms of Naha, Shuri, and Tomari, each Chinese tributary states. Minamoto refugees and the Chinese mission called the "Thirty-six Families" influenced Okinawa's culture. Out of this mix came the martial arts of tote-jutsu (striking blows), Ryukyu kobujutsu (weapons), and tegumi (grappling), the forerunners of modern karate. An aji (king) and a noro (shaman-priestess) ruled the kingdoms. The aji controlled day-to-day affairs, but the noro decided when to fight wars. The pechin, a class similar to the samurai, functioned as police and local officials; the sai, suggestive the human figure, was their badge of office.

Okinawan society has always been noted for its peace-loving character; after uniting the country, the Sho dynasty banned the private ownership of weapons, and Okinawa became well known as a port of call for ships from as far away as India. Ryugakusei, or "exchange students," traveled to China to learn science and Confucian scholarship.

In A.D. 1609, the Satsuma samurai clan invaded, beginning 270 years of Japanese military rule. Martial traditions were practiced in secret and adapted to make use of innocuous items like the nunchaku (rice flail) and eku (oar). However, sporadic uprisings gave way to a peaceful exchange, as several pechin toured Satsuma province in the ryugakusei tradition. When the Meiji Restoration's reforms threatened to stamp out the Okinawan dialect and culture, a few teachers began to teach these arts publicly.

In World War Two, Okinawa turned into hell on earth — for Okinawan bystanders, and American and Japanese combatants. After the war, the U.S. claimed the territory and dotted the Ryukyus with military bases. In the 21st Century, some Okinawans support the idea of independence from Japan and the expulsion of the U.S. armed forces. More moderate Okinawans remain concerned about preserving the Hogen dialect, traditional religion, and pacifist values.

from Hiroshima, thinking that the Allies would never bomb a Christian city. By August 14, Emperor Hirohito offered an unconditional surrender.

The Allies dismantled the imperial cult and imposed a constitution that left Hirohito a figurehead stripped of his divine mandate. Aside from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, conventional bombing had ruined other cities such as Tokyo. The rebuilding effort required severe rationing, but within 20 years the country had regained its heavy industries. Unfortunately, with rapid growth came environmental woes; in the 1960s, Tokyo was one of the most polluted cities in the world.



A land divided, Korea demonstrates the persistence of national identity despite occupation and civil war. While South Korea has become a cosmopolitan economic force, and North Korea combines insularity with military strength, both see themselves as the flowering of a common ancient heritage. To each, there is only one Korea — but whose Korea that will be is a matter that sheds blood and keeps families divided, as troops guard a border that could dissolve with war or reconciliation.

LAND OF THE MORNING CALM

According to legend, Korea was founded by the god Hwang Ung. When a tiger and bear demanded to be made human, Hwang Ung ordered them to purify themselves in a cave for 100 days, subsisting on the sacred herbs of garlic and mugwort. At the end of that period, only the bear remained, who bore Hwang Ung a son, Dan Gun Wang Gum. Tradition holds that Dan Gun established the first Korean kingdom, Choson, the “Land of the Morning Calm,” in 2333 B.C.

According to archaeologists and historians, tribal groups in the Korean Peninsula began to unite under pressure from China’s warring states. By the fourth century B.C., these alliances led to the kingdoms of Puyo and Koguryo, who held the country against invasion from the Chinese and Manchurians. Eventually, Puyo fell, and its survivors established Paekche in the west. The kingdom of Silla emerged from the east, created by anywhere from two to twenty tigers.

The Tigers are formed of an organic steel, the exact creation of which remains a deep secret to the Taiping Tianguo. The steel is remarkably flexible, allowing the Tiger to shift into any number of forms. While on simple guard, most Tigers disguise themselves as simple metal posts, metal statues, or even small machines. Even Awakened agents may stroll right past an ordinary metal chair, never noticing the tiny metallic eyes in the armrests, until the chair suddenly with Tang China and unified Korea. The Tang bureaucracy was modified to meet Korean needs. But incursions from Manchuria and

In the 1980s, Japanese corporations began aggressively expanding into the U.S. car sales and corporate takeovers were initially met with a wave of protectionism and some outright racism, but eventually the world market adapted to Japan’s economic might. The sarariman, slang for a loyal, lifetime employee, was emblematic of this period. Then in 1998, the collapse of Asian currencies followed by revelations of state and bank corruption threw the Japanese economy into a recession.

Stung by capitalism, Japan now reconsiders its place in the 21st century.

KOREA

dissent from the conquered territories of Koguryo and Paekche divided the country back into its old borders.

By 1200, the Mongols, who had conquered China and neighboring Manchuria, swept into the Korean Peninsula. The Koryo royal family fled to the island of Kanghwa, and were replaced with puppet kings. Kublai Khan launched two doomed fleets to Japan. When the Red Turban rebels of Taiping Tianguo agents in the area — and occasionally signal certain Miao Guan to handle any questionable memory problems. Usually, the computer contacts agents solely for clean up purposes.

Recently, a few Zaibatsu agents have claimed that these computers have had a few...problems. Some of the Tigers appear to be attacking Sleepers, while one or two of the less important centers have been infiltrated by Zaibatsu agents, who claim, under later questioning, to have been testing the warfare.

SHADOW WARRIORS AND SWORD DANCERS

Korea’s warrior traditions are more obscure than Japan’s but no less vibrant. The hwarang, Silla’s knighthood, followed a code that combined Buddhist ethics with absolute loyalty to Silla’s royalty. Like the samurai, the hwarang revered the sword, or gum. Each hwarang actually forged his own sword, customized for the warrior’s fighting style and duties (shorter, double-edged blades were used by palace guards).

A subset of the hwarang, the sulsa, undertook espionage missions and assassinations. The sulsa were said to have supernatural powers taught to them by Buddhist monks. These included the ability to read minds, turn invisible and see in total darkness. Unlike the ninja, the sulsa were respected members of the warrior class.

Sword dancers performed intricate movements with the gum to entertain the nobility and act as discreet bodyguards. One story tells of a sword dancer who dispatched an assassin with such artistry that none in attendance knew that they were witnessing a duel until the killing stroke.

In 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's forces invaded Choson. While Chinese allies and peasant guerillas harassed the Japanese, Choson's navy dominated the seas thanks to the tactical brilliance of Admiral Yi Sun-shin. Three years later, a second invasion was repelled without China's help, and the Tokugawa shogunate established trade and diplomatic relations with the country.

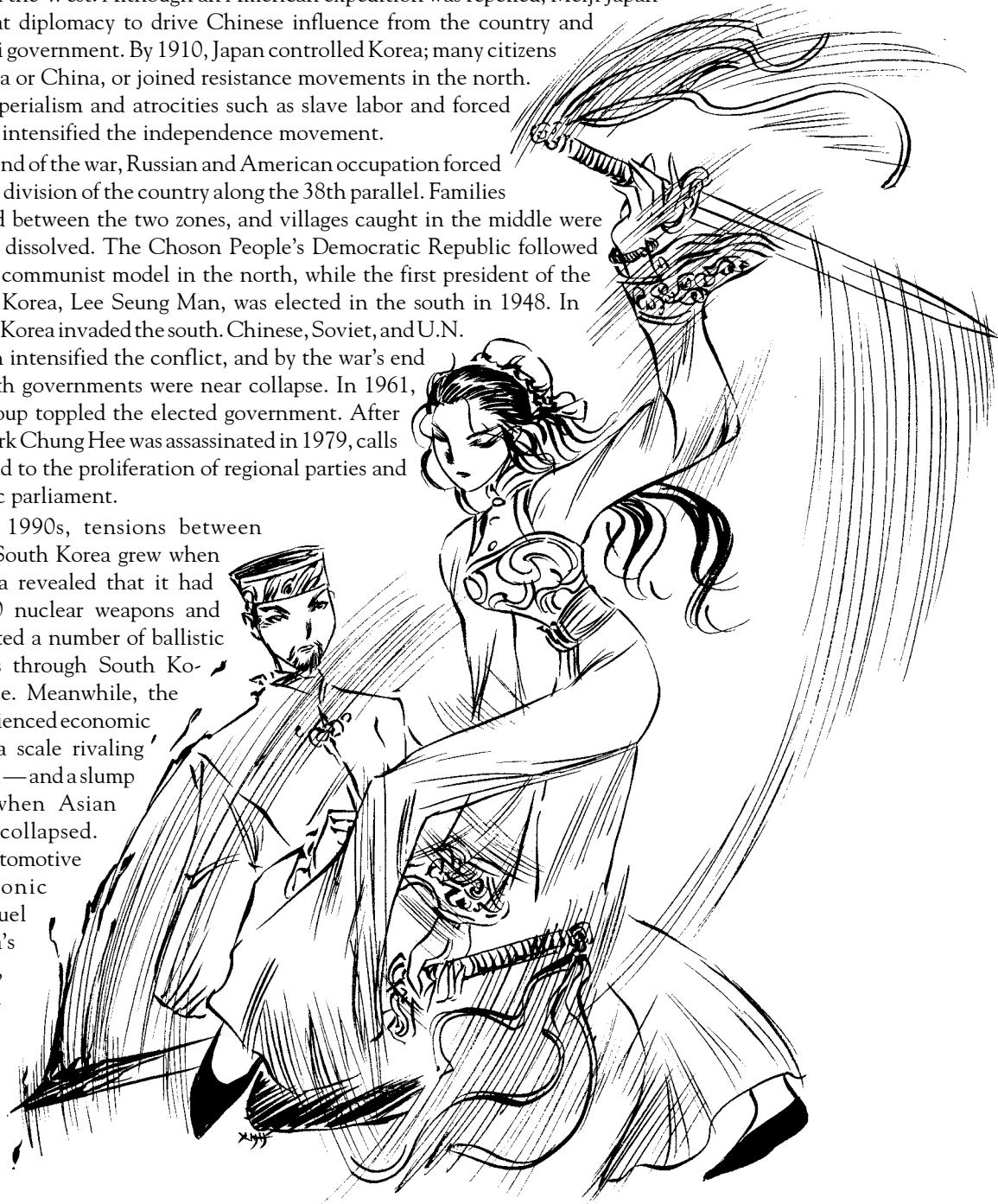
After China's Qing dynasty turned Choson into a tributary state, Korea sealed its borders, unwilling to remain the battleground for Japan, China and Manchuria. Tribute missions to Beijing exposed the country to Western culture; Catholicism was introduced by native scholars rather than by missionaries.

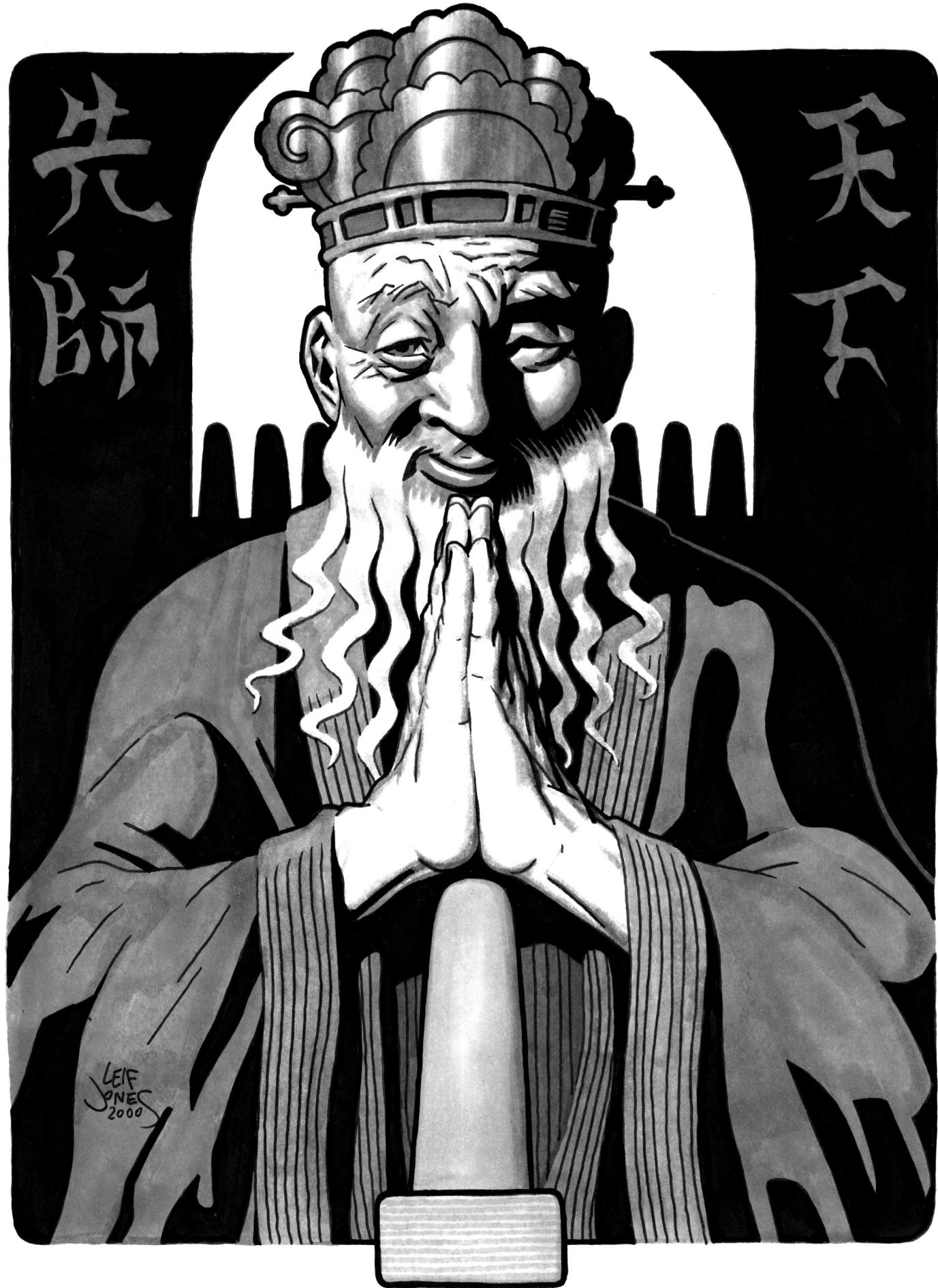
OCCUPATION AND DIVISION

With the Meiji Restoration and the Opium Wars unfolding around them, Korea was due to be thrust into direct contact with the West. Although an American expedition was repelled, Meiji Japan used gunboat diplomacy to drive Chinese influence from the country and topple the Yi government. By 1910, Japan controlled Korea; many citizens fled to Russia or China, or joined resistance movements in the north. Japanese imperialism and atrocities such as slave labor and forced prostitution intensified the independence movement.

At the end of the war, Russian and American occupation forced the arbitrary division of the country along the 38th parallel. Families were divided between the two zones, and villages caught in the middle were relocated or dissolved. The Choson People's Democratic Republic followed the Russian communist model in the north, while the first president of the Republic of Korea, Lee Seung Man, was elected in the south in 1948. In 1950, North Korea invaded the south. Chinese, Soviet, and U.N. intervention intensified the conflict, and by the war's end in 1953, both governments were near collapse. In 1961, a military coup toppled the elected government. After President Park Chung Hee was assassinated in 1979, calls for reform led to the proliferation of regional parties and a democratic parliament.

In the 1990s, tensions between North and South Korea grew when North Korea revealed that it had at least 100 nuclear weapons and had conducted a number of ballistic missile tests through South Korean airspace. Meanwhile, the South experienced economic growth on a scale rivaling that of Japan—and a slump as severe when Asian currencies collapsed. While the automotive and electronic industries fuel South Korea's economy, North Korea remains isolated from the rest of Asia.





CHAPTER TWO

SUTRAS



The Middle Kingdom possesses a rich spiritual legacy that can be the Chi'n Ta's greatest ally — or most implacable foe. Older faiths, such as Buddhism and Taoism, have shared devotees for centuries, and new religions have arisen from these mixed traditions. Although each religion is a complete tradition unto itself, few would refuse to honor one faith for the sake of the other. Syncretic religions such as Omoto-kyo

take this one step further, attempting to combine many traditions under a single practice.

This doesn't mean that Asia's religions have never competed for followers or temporal power; history is punctuated with warrior monks and burned temples.

Contrary to the Western notion of philosophy and religion as separate endeavors, Asian faiths combine vivid

mythology with an intellectually rigorous examination of humanity and the universe. Mystic and Metal Dragon alike have benefited from this potent combination, using it to develop magical paradigms that can embrace the workings of nature and honor the gods with equal vigor. While the sorcery and technology that follows stray from the orthodox doctrines of any of these religions, the Middle Kingdom's wizards nonetheless owe these beliefs a profound debt of gratitude.

On the other hand, the liberties that the Awakened take with the cosmic order can often offend the faithful, and the religious can punish an arrogant willworker as well as enlighten her. Combining metaphysical knowledge with a True Faith as potent as any Western witch-hunter's, a Taoist priest or Tibetan lama is more than capable of humbling a Chi'n Ta who dares to offend Heaven.

HINDUISM



*Through myself unborn, undying,
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,
which is mine, and I come into being
through my own magic*

— The Bhagavad Gita

THE TRUTH HAS A THOUSAND FACES

A complex and multifaceted faith, Hinduism's roots lie in the very beginning of Indian civilization. While specific beliefs can vary from place to place, the core of Hindu theology, stemming from the Vedas and embracing the concepts of karma, dharma and moksa, are common to all branches of the religion. According to Hindu doctrine, the gods are more than individuals; each is a unique face of the Supreme Truth, the god that creates, preserves and destroys.

The sacred scriptures of Hinduism are the four Vedas, but Hindus are not "People of the Book" in the manner of Christians, Jews or Muslims. They are not works to be quoted but the vibrations of the cosmos itself, creating gods, humans and cycles of birth and death with their very existence. The Vedas tell stories of the gods, the creation of the universe, and the Sacrifice of Purusa, the first man, whose body was divided up into land, water and jati (castes) of India. Other works, such as the Mahabharata, are also considered important enough that they are sometimes honored with the title of "fifth Veda." The Upanishads, a set of dialogues about ritual, theology, and liberation that guide modern Hindu practice, later reformed the legend and rituals of the Vedas.

Hinduism originated in India, but quickly spread throughout Southeast Asia and the Indonesian Archipelago. Emigration and the British colonial legacy have also fostered the religion's spread in North America and parts of Africa. Hindus don't proselytize, and thus the religion has fewer non-Asian adherents.

KARMA, DHARMA AND MOKSA

Karma and dharma represent the two fundamental concerns of Hindu life. A dharma is a path and a duty, dictated by jati and individual temperament, that leads to ethical acts and wisdom. An act performed out of dharma, rather than personal interest, is what a Hindu defines as a virtuous deed; the dharma of a particular jat may contradict a wider ethical principle. For example, in the Mahabharata, the hero Arjuna is reluctant to wage a war where the lives of his kin

THEOSOPHY

A Western tradition that exploited Hindu beliefs, Theosophy was founded by H. P. Blavatsky and James Olcott in 1875. After allegedly spending seven years in Tibet under the guidance of "mahatmas," Blavatsky combined European alchemy, Hindu beliefs and Egyptian snake worship to form a "universal wisdom tradition." A major influence on Western occultism, the Theosophical society relocated its headquarters to Madras, India in 1878. After Olcott's death, his successor Annie Besant groomed Jiddu Krishnamurti to be the messiah of the twentieth century (Krishnamurti eventually renounced this claim and founded his own school). Theosophy drew many of its teachings from Vedanta Hinduism, albeit in a distorted and highly prejudicial form; even so, it inspired some of the earliest popular Western scholarship on Hinduism and Buddhism. Supernatural beliefs were an important part of Theosophy; Blavatsky was famous in Spiritualist circles for her abilities as a medium.

may be lost, but the god Krishna assures him that to follow his dharma, he must fight.

Karma refers to the consequences of performing (or failing to perform) dharma. When dharma is followed with diligence and virtue, a Hindu is assured of rebirth in a better life. If dharma is neglected then one might be reborn to a worse life as a person, an animal, or even in a Hot or Cold Hell. Good karma, which assures a better rebirth, is essential to spiritual growth, but it can be an obstacle to the highest spiritual attainments, as its fruits bind the devotee to materialistic concerns. Since many Chi'n Ta have observed that the Avatar will only join to a human birth, the study of karma is a popular pursuit among the Awakened.

Ultimately, the goal of Hinduism is to supercede karma all together. Moksa, "liberation," represents freedom from the cycle of birth and death, as the atman ("self" or "soul") achieves ultimate union with God, the Supreme Truth of the Brahman, the world soul.

THE WAY OF THE GODS

While there are an uncountable number of gods in Hinduism, some are more popular than others and fulfill specific roles. But gods are not discrete beings; a village god may be an avatar of one or several greater gods, and the trimurtri of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are often represented as a single, three-headed being. The highest jat, the Brahmin priesthood, attend to the rituals that honor each god. Temples are considered a god's body on earth; there,

offerings are presented according to the guidelines set by the Vedas and Upanishads, and the traditions preserved by the Brahmins. These offerings vary according to the occasion and local customs, and can include flowers, milk and animal sacrifices.

THE TRIMURTI — CREATOR, PRESERVER AND DESTROYER

The cyclical nature of the cosmos is ultimately represented by Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer, through whom all things pass.

Brahma, the Creator, is rarely worshiped directly. He is not to be confused with the Brahman, or world soul, that a Hindu seeks ultimate union with.

Vishnu, the Preserver, guides Hindus to dharma and intercedes to save humanity from flood, wars and false teachings. In this aeon, he has appeared nine times to do this, and will appear for the tenth and last time at the end of this world. His incarnations have included the fish that saved Manu, the first man; the hero Rama; the god Krishna; and the Buddha. He appears with his consort, Sri, the Goddess of Good Fortune, and is seated on the nine headed serpent Ananta, "Infinity."

Shiva, the Destroyer, is an ambivalent figure, the outsider of the gods. Benevolent and dangerous, Shiva represents the contradictory passions that can create or destroy. On one hand, he is the patron of many ascetics, and on the other, he manifests as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, and figures in Tantric rituals. He appears with four arms: one carries a drum to create the universe, one a flame to destroy it, one to protect the world, and one pointing to his feet, which destroy falsehood. The lingam, a symbolic phallus, is his symbol.

The Trimurtri are often depicted as one god, encompassing the Supreme Truth of Liberation. This also symbolizes that each god is an aspect of the others; Shiva also creates, and Vishnu destroys that which is evil or contrary to dharma. Rather than three separate gods with individual functions, all

three are manifestations of the one, supreme God. Forehead markings serve to show devotion for a particular deity, such as the horizontal lines of ash used to mark a follower of Shiva.

THE GODDESS

The Goddess has many names and natures, not all of which are benevolent. As Parvati, she tempers her mate Shiva's destructive power, and as Sakti, she is the power of Shiva personified.

However, she may also manifest as Durga, slayer of demons, or Kali, the mother who kills her own children. Yet even in her terrifying forms,



THE AVATAR

In Hindu belief, an avatar is the earthly incarnation of a deity. Many figures from Hindu legend and a few modern gurus are believed to be divine beings in mortal guise. The term is also used when a god appears on earth as another deity, such as when Vishnu was Krishna. These are momentous occasions; the appearance of a true avatar (as opposed to the soul of a mage) should be a rare event comparable to a visit from an angel or saint.

The term "Avatar" came to be used by Tradition mages to describe the spirits or dreams that guide them through the efforts of the Celestial Chorus. Indian Choristers had already used the term in that manner for several centuries to describe themselves as aspects of the One. Already weakened by accusations of Western bias, the Council accepted the term as a matter of political expediency when it became clear that the Akashic Brotherhood and Chakravanti would never agree on an alternative. Ironically, both the death mages and the Warring Fists use the idea of the avatar in their magic the most; both have rituals designed to yoke the Awakened self to a god and manifest its powers on earth. These are not true avatars in the religious sense, which would, at the very least, be a manifestation of True Faith, coming from a power beyond the reach of mortal sorcerers.

the Goddess is respected. Durga's statue is dressed in garlands to commemorate her victory over the buffalo-demon Mahisa. Kali is also honored as the one who destroys what has become weak and flawed. Up until the end of the 18th century, Kali was venerated with ritual strangulation and dismemberment by the Thug cult, but this was as much a form of banditry as true devotion, as many Thugs grew rich off the looted bodies of their victims.

While Western scholars often treat them as distinct and separate, most followers recognize them as avatars of one Goddess. Lakshmi, Goddess of Learning, is an exception; venerated as the inventor of writing, she is usually worshiped alone.

OTHER GODS

Elephant-headed Ganesh is one of the most popular gods. As the remover of obstacles, the son of Shiva and Parvati is always propitiated before any major undertaking, such as a journey or business venture. Hanuman the Monkey King is a protector of the common people. In addition, every community has its own god or goddess; these are often identified with pan-Hindu deities such as Vishnu or Devi. In addition, the older Vedic deities, such as Agni, god of fire, are still respected and worshiped. All of God's manifestations are the product of divine wisdom, and therefore deserve respect.

HINDU YOGA

Yoga is a form of mental and physical discipline by which to achieve union with a god or the Brahman. In the West, Hatha Yoga, which perfects the physical body, has become very popular. Yoga is used loosely to describe any dedicated method to achieve liberation. Thus, Karma Yoga, the yoga of work, concentrates on generating good karma in everyday life, and Bhakti Yoga describes liberation through religious devotion. Of the methods of Yoga that require dedicated practice under a guru, Jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga, the disciplines of wisdom and concentration, are well known but practiced less often than Hatha Yoga.

An advanced yogin is said to manifest supernatural powers (siddhi), which include clairvoyance, knowledge of past incarnations and the ability to be many places at once. It is well known that some advanced yoga practitioners are capable of controlling normally autonomic functions of the body, such as the heart rate and breathing reflex.

Yoga is a popular, almost required practice for Chi'n Ta from Hindu societies. Modified versions of Hatha, Jnana, and Raja Yoga are common practices for these sorcerers; as a flowering of yogic discipline, siddhi are often considered coincidental. Unfortunately, the humbler Karma and Bhakti forms are often neglected, and the would-be guru cultivates arrogance instead of enlightenment.

COSMIC CYCLES

Hindus and Buddhists both believe that the universe has been created and destroyed many times as part of an endless cycle in which the lives of gods, heroes and mortals repeat themselves. Each day, or kalpa, as Brahma the Creator reckons it, lasts approximately 4.3 billion years. After one hundred "years" of kalpas, the world is consumed by Vishnu or Shiva to await a new Creator. Each of the fourteen "hours" (manavantas) in a kalpa is divided into seventy-one maha-yugas, each of which contains four yugas: a golden age, two ages of decline, and finally the Kali Yuga, the Age of Iron, when human beings have turned away from righteousness (dharma) and look towards the end of the manavantara, when humanity is annihilated and recreated. According to Hindu reckoning, the Kali Yuga began in 3120 B.C.

However, there is hope. Hindus speak of the final return of Vishnu to aid humanity one last time, and Buddhists say that Maitreya, the next Buddha, will reintroduce dharma to the world.

As the Sixth Age dawns, Chi'n Ta would do well to remember the offer of salvation that their cultures offer even in the midst of a cosmic reckoning.

BUDDHISM



*How many enemies, measureless as the sky,
will I be able to destroy?
Yet when the thought of anger is destroyed
so are all enemies*

— Shantideva

BEYOND SUFFERING

In about 500 B.C., Hindu concepts of the soul, karma and dharma were radically re-examined by the spiritual teacher Siddhartha Guatama. Born to the Sakya clan of kshatriyas (warriors), Prince Siddhartha abandoned a life of contented marriage when he encountered the suffering, old age and death of others on a royal procession. After subjecting himself to yogic discipline and extreme asceticism, the highest levels of spiritual accomplishment in that tradition left him unsatisfied. Reduced to a virtual skeleton through fasting, he found refuge in the Middle Way of discipline and care for the body, and rested under a fig tree. He was tempted by Mara, the Evil One, who sent his daughters — personifications of worldly desire — to distract him. Siddhartha remained unmoved. Finally, after banishing the demon, he recalled all of his past lives, learned the true nature of karma and dharma and realized the Four Noble Truths. He became the Buddha, or “Awakened One.”

For a time the Buddha considered keeping his enlightenment a secret, but his compassion compelled him to share his teachings with others. His first disciples, companions from his days as an ascetic, heard his first teachings and became arhats — enlightened hermits.

Further, Buddhists believe that the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni (“sage of the Sakya clan”) was only one of many buddhas from the past, and destined for the future, who have vowed to lead humanity to enlightenment. Potential buddhas, called bodhisattvas, will compassionately guide all people to a perfect knowledge of the dharma.

Buddhism is practiced throughout Asia. The religion has spread through a program of nonviolent proselytizing and a willingness to incorporate local religious traditions. Though bitter feuds (and, in Japan, outright warfare) have occurred between rival sects in the past, modern Buddhism is swept by an ecumenical movement that accepts the primacy of basic Buddhist teachings. Ironically, it is rare in its birthplace, India.

BUDDHIST GODS

Early Buddhist teachings were ambivalent about the existence or relevance of the gods; after all, the Buddha urged followers to work out their own salvation without relying on faith. While buddhas and bodhisattvas are loved and venerated, they are not gods but enlightened beings who followers can emulate. The Hindu gods have always been honored by Buddhists, and as the faith spread, local gods were incorporated whenever possible. Thus, Buddhist clergy rarely perform weddings or coming of age ceremonies — these are under the jurisdiction of local gods — but they do perform funerals, which are an important step in the road to rebirth and nirvana. The Bardo Thodol, or Tibetan Book of the Dead, is used in Vajrayana to guide a dead person towards Buddha nature, or, failing that, to a good human birth for another attempt.

Buddhists differentiate between worldly spirits and manifestations of the Buddha. Worldly spirits are ghosts, gods, or nature spirits who have some temporal power but little wisdom, while manifestations of the Buddha are gods or spirits that represent the Buddha’s face in different cultures. Japanese Buddhists often venerate the kami as buddhas (others do the reverse). Worldly spirits are often converted to the dharma and guard Buddhist temples.

This isn’t always an obvious distinction. The current Dalai Lama has banned the veneration of a spirit known to its followers as Dorje Shugden. While Shugden advocates proclaim that it is a manifestation of a bodhisattva, the Dalai Lama maintains that it is a worldly being that has tried to harm his previous incarnations. This has led to a schism between the Gelugpa school and Shugden’s followers that has erupted into occasional threats and even violence.

THREE JEWELS, FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Buddhists revere the “Three Jewels,” consisting of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The Buddha is revered for setting an example with his holy life. Both his final incarnation and past lives show how an ordinary person can lead a righteous life and take the Bodhisattva Vow to become a buddha and save others.

The Dharma takes on a different meaning for Buddhists than for Hindus. While Hindu dharma relates to social ob-

ligations and moral teaching, Buddhist dharma refers to a definitive truth about humanity and the cosmos. At the core of the dharma are the Four Noble Truths:

The First Noble Truth, that suffering (dhukkha) is inevitable, means that everyone will experience pain. Birth, illness, and death cause pain, as does the loss of loved ones, fear, anger and longing.

The Second Noble Truth is that the origin of suffering is desire or craving (tanha). People crave what they do not have or are disappointed when they achieve it or lose it. At the core of tanha lies an unrealistic desire for a permanent self that is immune to the vicissitudes the world.

The Third Noble Truth states that suffering can be cured if desire or craving is vanquished. This does not occur through ascetic discipline, but by following the Middle Way that rejects extremes of sensual desire or self-denial.

Finally, the Fourth Noble Truth asserts that the cure for suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path of right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. By practicing each of these simultaneously, like the growth of lotus petals, desire and suffering can be conquered, and the Buddhist set upon the road to Nirvana.

Part of the dharma includes teachings about the nature of reality. Sunyata refers to the condition of impermanence. All things are dynamic processes rather than static entities; what exists one moment will be different, gone, or transformed the next, constantly being absorbed into other objects or being divided into several. How then, can we say that any one thing has an intrinsic existence?

Anatta tells how a thing can exist without intrinsic constancy; this is the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. There is no indivisible core to a human being, but a set of functional states, or skhandas, that provide the illusion of a permanent self. By realizing that there is no self, or soul, to be concerned with, Buddhists learn that the idea of selfishness is a fallacy, since it is a concern with something that never truly existed in the first place. The ideas of karma and rebirth are then modified; Buddhist karma refers only to mental events that cause pain, pleasure and attachment. Rebirth is the duplication of an old personality in a new body, like one candle being used to light another.

The Sangha refers to the Buddhist monastic order, or more loosely, the larger Buddhist community. Ultimately, four distinctions make up the larger Sangha: those who have begun the practice, those who have sufficiently advanced that they will only be reborn once, those who are on their last life before Nirvana, and those who have become arhats (saints).

Monks and nuns (bhiksu and bhiksunis) abide by differing vows depending on their sect and region; a Sri Lankan Theravadan monk is (ideally) celibate, vegetarian, and only owns three robes, whereas Japanese Zen monks often marry and eat meat. All Buddhists try to follow the Five Precepts:

to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication.

THREE TURNINGS OF THE WHEEL

As the Buddha's teachings spread, they developed into three major schools of thought. Each movement sees itself as the culmination of the one before it — a turning of the Wheel of the Dharma.

THERAVADA — THE SCHOOL OF THE ELDERS

The Theravada tradition was first formalized to heal schisms in the early Sangha. The monks Ananda and Upali recited the Buddha's words, contributing to a common canon called the Tripitaka ("Three Baskets"). This laid the groundwork for a common set of teachings that emphasized the importance of monastic poverty and nonviolence. A conservative tradition, Theravada holds the arhat as the supreme example of Buddhist virtue. Divested of material attachments, an arhat completes the journey to nirvana in quiet solitude. Theravadan Buddhism remains highly strict; a devout Theravadan adheres to vows of poverty, refrains

TANTRA

If the world is bound by lust, it can be released by lust

— Tantric Saying

Both Vajrayana Buddhism and Hinduism possess a Tantric tradition. Tantra utilizes sexual desire as a means to induce spiritual awakening. A form of yoga, partners visualize themselves as divine figures (a bodhisattva and dakini for Buddhists) whose union transcends simple lust, conquering it as an attachment. Hindu Tantra is designed to raise Sakti, the power of the Goddess. The Kundalini, the "snake" of coiled Sakti, rises through the spine, activating the chakras and producing ecstatic awakening. Buddhist Tantra initiates its disciples into a family of buddhas, bodhisattvas and their consorts; sexual union symbolizes the merging of wisdom (male) and compassion (female). These practices are divided into right hand Tantra, where sexual union is symbolic, and left hand Tantra, where intercourse actually takes place. Many practitioners of left hand Tantra also consciously break taboos (such as those against eating meat and drinking alcohol), reasoning that such barriers form an unskillful material attachment as much as indulging them would.

As a religion, most Tantra is currently right hand (Vajrayana Buddhism is also called Tantric Buddhism, but Tantra is now normally used to describe a specific practice, not a sect). Most Tantra, and left hand Tantra especially, is an esoteric practice; while many books have been written on the subject, few interested parties actually belong to any of the older Tantric lineages.

from eating flesh, abhors violence and upholds other similarly stringent requirements based upon the Eightfold Path.

Theravada is the dominant strain of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

MAHAYANA — THE GREAT VEHICLE

By the fourth century A.D., several Buddhist schools began to emphasize the bodhisattva as a role model for Buddhists. As one who has vowed to forgo Nirvana until all sentient beings are enlightened, bodhisattvas have the power to relieve mortals of their karmic stains, allowing them to be reborn into a paradise. By following their example and taking the Bodhisattva Vow, Mahayana Buddhists can join them in paradise. An offshoot, Pure Land Buddhism, venerates the Buddha Amitabha (in Japanese, Amida) whose Bodhisattva Vow is that anyone who sincerely calls upon him will be reborn in his Western Paradise, regardless of their bad karma.

Zen Buddhism, a Japanese sect of Mahayana, traces its roots to the Shaolin Temple in China, where the Indian patriarch Bodhidharma taught that all beings were potential buddhas that only had to recall their innermost nature to achieve enlightenment. This Ch'an (meditation) teaching was imported to Japan, where the sudden path to enlightenment was emphasized. Koans, poetry, and even violence are among

the tools used by Zen roshi (masters) to shock their students into their originally empty buddha-selves.

VAJRAYANA — THE DIAMOND THUNDERBOLT VEHICLE

A magical form of Buddhism, Vajrayana has perhaps contributed more than any other form of Buddhism to the Middle Kingdom's magical paradigm. Called the "Third Turning of the Wheel" by adherents, Vajrayana sees itself as the culmination of the Theravada and Mahayana practices. After studying the methods of the previous two sects, a chela (disciple) is expected to learn meditation practices such as mantras, mudras and mandalas, the invocation of local spirits and mystical union with buddhas and gods. Vajrayana's magical knowledge is often taught in secret; texts are often incomplete and deliberately misleading, to preserve the secret oral transmission of knowledge between guru and chela.

Vajrayana was practiced throughout the Buddhist world, and the ruins of temples and cities that are laid out in sacred mandalas can still be seen in parts of Southeast Asia. In modern times, Japan, China, and Tibet have an active Vajrayana Sangha. Tibet's traditions are the best known today, particularly those of the Gelugpa school, headed by the Dalai Lama. To followers, the Dalai Lama is a bodhisattva, constantly undergoing mortal rebirth in order to aid his people.

CONFUCIANISM



At fifteen I set my heart on learning.
At thirty I became firm.
At forty I had no more doubts.
At fifty I understood Heaven's will.
At sixty I could hear it.
At seventy I could follow my heart's desire, without
overstepping the line.
— K'ung-fu Tzu, the Analects

THE GREAT PRINCIPLE

K'ung-fu Tzu, or "Master K'ung," a minor advisor to one of the states of Lu, reacted to the turmoil of his time by describing a theory of ethical conduct and harmonious social behavior. K'ung's teachings emphasized a return to ancestral rites, reciprocal kindness and a respect for hierarchy and authority. Master K'ung advised people to follow the will of Heaven — not with empty rituals but with sincere efforts. Known as Confucianism in the West (after Master K'ung's Latinized name) it is usually referred to as the Scholar's Doctrine in the Middle Kingdom.

Confucians regard the Analects, Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean as essential texts, as well as the Book of Mencius (Meng-tzu), who is the greatest Confucian scholar after K'ung himself. The Master regarded the I Ching and

the Annals of the Spring and Autumn Period as the guides by which tradition and ritual should be followed. The origin and contents of these earlier works are uncertain, and the Book of Music was lost in the Burning of the Books by Qin Shihuang. Still, a great volume of work remains for Confucian scholars.

Confucian thought created much of the social structure of China, Japan, and Korea, and has had undeniable influence throughout the rest of Asia. The Confucian values of family harmony and scholarship still run strong, even in modern China, which has consciously attempted to exterminate it.

HUMANITY AND HIERARCHY

Jen and Li are two of the most important principles of Confucianism. The Analects say, "never do to others what you would not like them to do to you." This negative Golden Rule expresses the essence of Jen — the natural state for human beings, who normally wish to help others.

Li is formal kindness and propriety — a sort of noblesse oblige that the Superior Person must display to put others at ease. Endowed with Li, she performs ceremonies with both correct form and heartfelt meaning. Formerly considered to be a virtue beyond the grasp of common folk, Confucianism asserts that Li is a quality that anyone may cultivate if they wish to emulate the sages of old.

Jen and Li must be administered properly in order to promote peace and wise leadership. The Five Relationships between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend, properly direct the virtues. Ultimately, the Confucian ideal derives from the patriarchal family, so that the minister's duty to the ruler is similar to the son's duty to the father. As the father is the head of the family, so the ruler is the head of the state; each is responsible for performing the rituals that bring success to their charges. An effective ruler begins with his family, exercising Jen and Li in his own household. While the wise ruler treats the state like a family to be compassionately governed, he still assumes the role of a subject, son or daughter in performing rituals to honor her ancestors and the gods. To truly act like a child of Heaven is important; rulers are as subject to the Mandate of Heaven, just as mortals are subject to a minister's decrees. Mencius warns that a ruler who governs foolishly or despotically loses the Mandate, and the common people have a right to rebel against him.

HONORING THE ANCESTORS

The *Book of Rites* lays out instructions on how to venerate one's ancestors and gods. While these rites existed before Master K'ung, he considered them to be an important part of leading a tranquil and ordered life. Such rites maintain the principles of filial piety and acknowledge wise leadership, such as when an honest magistrate, a wise scholar, or a valiant hero is honored with offerings and a temple. A libation or other offering should also be given to the ancestors in the event of a marriage, funeral, or important household decision. Among the Lighting People, ancestor worship is second nature. A Wu Lung barely distinguishes between the magical and ceremonial offerings she makes. Few Chi'n Ta ignore their ancestors; even the Stone People know that Heaven watches them more intently and will punish them all more severely for impiety.

“Capping,” a traditional ritual used to celebrate a male's passage into adulthood, is an example of a common Confucian ritual. The adolescent is given his formal hat and robe, as well as his adult name. After a libation to his ancestors, he is officially presented to them as a man.

One of the few exceptions to the emphasis on traditional rituals is Master K'ung's rejection of human sacrifice, including the burial of live or even symbolic concubines and servants. Such practices were wrong, K'ung reasoned, because they violated the principle of Jen.

Confucian beliefs attribute a twofold soul to human beings. The lower, animal soul, called the P'o, descends to the earth with the body, becoming a kuei, or ghost, while the intellectual half of the soul, the Hun, rises to heaven and becomes a celestial spirit (shen). These beliefs are quite

MOISM, THE MYSTIC'S DOCTRINE

A former Confucian, Mo-tzu came to oppose his teacher in many respects. While K'ung-fu-tzu was discreet about theological questions, Mo aggressively promoted the idea of Heaven as the Supreme Being, with a host of ghostly and spiritual intermediaries. Master Mo was a militant pacifist, going so far as to learn military strategy so that he could prevent wars. In one instance, he garrisoned the state of Sung with his disciples so as to force the would-be invaders from the larger state of Ch'u to abandon their plans. He often spoke at odds with tradition, and favored universal, equal love over Master K'ung's Jen, which flowed from the family first and strongest.

Mo-tzu's eccentric doctrine was eventually overtaken by Confucianism, largely because Master Mo's zeal and unorthodoxy begot little sympathy. A moral utilitarian, he rejected Confucian ritual whenever it interfered with equal love, scandalizing his contemporaries. His disciples, wandering soldiers of peace, are perhaps the best loved part of his legacy.

Though it is generally thought to be a dead faith, the Li-Hai of the Akashic Brotherhood still uphold Master Mo's beliefs. Combining formidable fighting skills with spirit powers, these Moist Brothers intervene at the most inconvenient times, disarming both sides and ordering them to cease hostilities. This usually only works when both sides cooperate to annihilate the interloper, but occasionally, the pacifist wizard is wily or powerful enough to pull it off.

popular among Chinese Chi'n Ta. Rituals allow contact with the heavenly and ancestral shen, but they must be conducted with great humility and piety. Without Li, they are worse than useless.

Later, Neo-Confucians applied the Master's principles of social harmony to self-cultivation. The T'ai Chi, or Absolute, represents the highest state of Li. It is humanity's natural state, but exposure to worldly Chi and the processes of Yin, Yang and the Five Taoist elements degrades this nature. Thus, human beings need self-discipline and a commitment to justice and orthodoxy to reattain their Heavenly nature.

The metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism also added a rigidity and strict hierarchy to the Scholar's Doctrine that was not originally a feature of Master K'ung's teaching, but suited societies such as feudal Japan, where it enforced distinctions between samurai and peasant, man and woman.

LEGALISM

Legalism is the exception to the general principle that the Middle Kingdom's beliefs straddle the boundaries between philosophy and religion. Legalism makes no spiritual or metaphysical claims whatsoever and seems to have more like Machiavelli than Confucius.

Legalism's basic precept is the supremacy of the ruler's ambitions above all ethical considerations. Laws exist solely as a method to exercise power and must be created, used and abused in the service of that power. In sharp contrast to Confucianism, a ruler should have no friends, even among members of his own family — every confidant is a potential enemy. A system of rewards and punishments are to be used to determine loyalty. Disobedience is not to be tolerated; harsh punishments for even minor infractions should exist to deter subjects from any rebellious impulses.

Legalist works are usually written as handbooks for leadership. The most famous, written by Prince Han Fei Tzu in approximately 200 B.C., warns a ruler not to permit private affairs to get in the way of statecraft. All agreements, even between close associates, should be formalized under law. An ideal prince has no desires beyond the preservation and exercise of raw political power. Lust, vanity and friendship are exploitable weaknesses.

One sect of the Akashic Brotherhood, the Shi-Ren, combines Legalist doctrine with the Brotherhood's tenets, espousing a mutual duty that applies to ghost and sorcerer alike. Its frank materialism and despotism make it a common political philosophy for the Wu Lung and their descendants in the Five Metal Dragons. While the Dragon Emperor Wizard has banned the magical use of Legalist doctrine, many Wu Lung study it to better understand their enemy... and their superior.

TAOISM



*There is a thing confusedly formed,
born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
goes round and does not weary.*
— The *Tao-te Ching*

Little is known of Lao-tzu, founder of Taoism, before his journey to the West. He left his only written work, the *Tao-te Ching*, with a border guard. Then, tradition holds, he left China on the back of an ox, never to be seen in mortal flesh again.

The *Tao-te Ching* has two sections. The first introduces the idea of the Tao, the unchanging, ultimate principle of the universe. The source of all things, the Tao can be contemplated by considering the yielding, passive things in nature, such as water. The guiding principle is wu-wei, literally "non-action" — a Taoist acts with just enough energy or passivity to allow the Tao to manifest without hindrance. The second section is devoted to Te, the way that the universal Tao is wielded in human affairs. Here, the *Tao-te Ching* recommends the rejection of burdensome traditions and proposes a decentralized government. The sage-ruler of such a state applies wu-wei to local affairs, preventing too much or too little ambition from destroying the community.

Eventually, the ideas in the *Tao-te Ching* branched into philosophical and religious streams. While Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's writings are the central inspirations, for philosophical Taoism, religious Taoism merges Chinese folk religion and Taoist mysticism into a complex practice that concerns itself with immortality and the Way of Heaven.

PHILOSOPHICAL TAOISM

Taoism's second great thinker, Chuang-tzu, laid the groundwork for philosophical Taoism. A mystical thinker, Chuang-tzu emphasized unity with the Tao. By "fasting the mind," and letting go of traditions and prejudices, a disciple can attain free herself from emotional turmoil and bondage to the cycle of life and death. The mystic lets go of all distinctions between objects and people, and opens herself to the indescribable Tao.

Philosophical Taoism became a communal protest against traditional Confucian values. In the middle of the third century, a group called the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove opposed the intellectual establishment, and led eccentric, hedonistic lives. In a manner reminiscent of the 1960s counterculture, the Seven Worthies practiced enjoyment for its own sake, drinking, singing, and composing poetry. Juan Chi shared a huge cauldron of wine with his pigs. When visitors asked Liu Ling why he never wore clothes, he replied that since Heaven and earth were roof and floor enough for him, his house would be his clothing. Then he asked them to

get out of his pants! Taoist philosophy has encouraged a spontaneous aesthetic attitude towards life. Philosophical Taoists influenced Chinese poetry, and their appreciation for oddly shaped stones and other simple yet startling manifestations of nature influenced Chinese artists and Japanese Zen gardens.

RELIGIOUS TAOISM

Taoist religion began with mystics and alchemists who combined reverence for the Yellow Emperor and Lao-tzu into one deified figure, Hung-Lao. The cult combined traditional Chinese belief in the Celestial Bureaucracy with the emerging theories of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements of fire, earth, water, metal, and wood.

The first Taoist religious institution, the Celestial Masters, began in Szechwan, in the south of China, when Lao-tzu allegedly appeared to Chang Tao-ling in a mountain cave in the second century A.D.; After complaining that demonic influence and disrespect had led the world away from the Tao, Lao-tzu made Chang the first Celestial Master, charged with casting out the demons and returning people to the ways of wisdom. The Celestial Masters opposed animal sacrifices to the dead, replacing them with vegetable offerings. They also cared for the sick and instituted confession as a cure for illness. Prayers were offered to Heaven, Earth, and the rivers, mirroring the Taoist trinity.

Today, the Celestial Masters are based in Taiwan and are popular throughout southern China. Clergy are married, and both men and women may be priests. Priesthood is often hereditary. Taoist priests receive licenses for particular rituals, and a group of priests may cover all of the needed rites for a community. In the north, monastic Taoists of the Perfect Truth sect practice fasting, internal alchemy, and meditation. The Taoist canon is vast, over 1,000 volumes, and few can master every aspect of it. Training may include sword routines, acrobatics, chi-kung, the use of mudras, and practices such as the Five Thunders, where a priest learns to emit his Chi to affect others. The best-known rituals revolve around the Lunar New Year and include the lion dance and firecrackers to frighten away demons. On the winter solstice, the Rite of Cosmic Renewal symbolizes the sun's rebirth and return to the world. All Taoist rituals include the use of incense and the burning of sacred writings, along with prayers by the faithful.

TAOIST MYTHOLOGY

At the head of the Taoist pantheon are a trinity of deities: The Jade Emperor, Lord Tao, and Lord Lao. The Jade Emperor is the supreme being, the creator and ruler of the past. Lord Tao, the Precious Celestial One, rules the present and represents the Tao personified. Lord Lao,

TAOISM AND THE CH'IN TA

Religious Taoism makes few distinctions between priests and sorcerers. Both perform similar rituals in similar costumes and may even work together on an exorcism or other supernatural task. In a sense, a priest is a general practitioner, while a wizard is a specialist in certain areas that require trance states, fortunetelling or shamanism who may or may not be formally ordained.

Much of this comes from religious Taoism's origins in the Han Dynasty, which was heavily infiltrated (some might even argue utterly controlled) by the Wu Lung. Yin, Yang and the Five Elements were rigorously used in their magic and proto-science, and the Dragon Wizards wished their discoveries to be fully accepted by the Chinese people. Taoism provided a perfect blend of the rational and mystical, an ideal addition to the Wu Lung's paradigm. Certainly, they took pains to de-emphasize the second part of the *Tao-te Ching*, which called for political and social change; peasants could hardly be left to their own affairs, after all. The Magical Bureaucracy felt they now had the new faith well in hand.

Thus, they were utterly confounded by the revelations of the first Celestial Master, Chang Tao-ling. Chang's followers included several powerful wizards, and the Master himself was untouchable through magical means. Worse still, many Wu Lung thought that Chang's stated mission, to cast out "demons" that had received the mistaken worship of the people, was a veiled reference to their dominance over imperial ritual and the state cult.

After many failed attempts, the Wu Lung gave up on the Celestial Masters and switched to quietly accepting Taoist sorcerers into the Magical Bureaucracy. Taoist practices have since left an indelible influence on the Wu Lung.

The Akashic Brotherhood has also enlisted Taoist magicians and beliefs to further their own understanding. The Harmonious Brothers tend to draw from philosophical Taoism, although they maintain ancient alliances with monastic sorcerers from the Perfect Truth and Pole Star sects, whose Taoists' ascetic practices and martial ability closely mirror their own.

But most Awakened Taoists are Taoists first, last and foremost. Taoism accepts magical practice and provides an explicit, structured path to mastery. There is simply no need for a religious Taoist to deal with the politics and doctrinal compromises of other Lightning People if she doesn't wish to. Small, sectarian fraternities serve most Taoist Chi'n Ta well.

the divine Lao-tzu, rules the future. Beneath the Taoist trinity lies the Celestial Bureaucracy of Chinese folk religion, with the Stove God, Earth God, and City God watching over the people.

The Eight Immortals of Taoism are people who have gained enough merit to live forever. Similar to Catholic saints, the Eight Immortals are called upon in times of crisis, and each serves a particular trade or group of people. Li, with an iron crutch, is the patron of pharmacists. General Tsao serves actors, and Chung-li Chuan, with his peach and feather fan, comes to the aid of silversmiths. Their leader, Lu Tung-pin, was a famous alchemist who gave magical silver to those in need. The rest of the Eight Immortals are similarly generous and aid their charges in finding happiness.

Taoism also has a messiah figure. In the *Classic of Great Peace*, it is prophesied that Heaven will grant the words of a divine book to the Chen-Jen (true man). The prophet of his age, he will give this celestial text to a virtuous ruler. This prince will take the Tao into his heart and rule by its power, entrusting authority to his ministers and the common people alike. The Tao will maintain harmony and the prince will rarely punish or coerce his subjects.

ALCHEMY AND IMMORTALITY

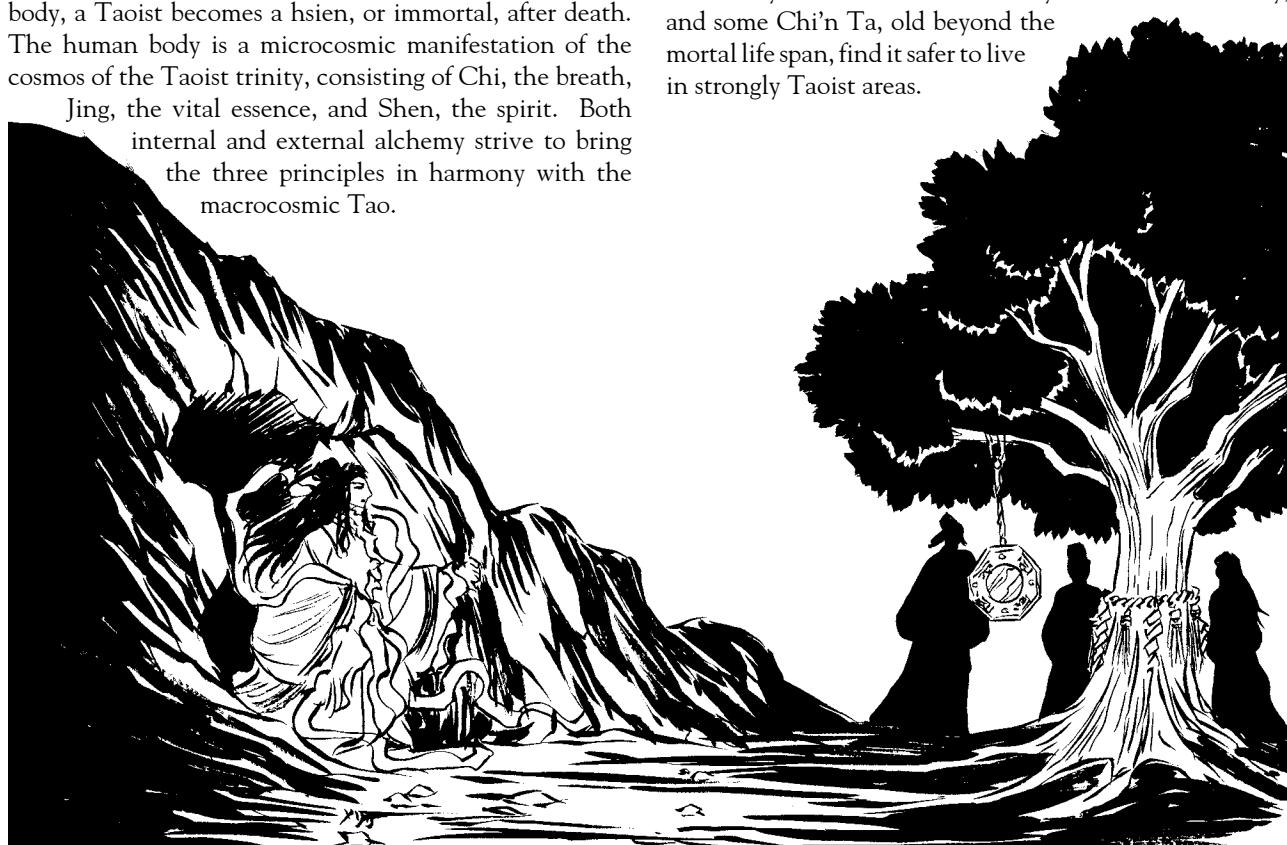
One of the goals of Taoism is to achieve immortality. By achieving a balance of Yin and Yang in her mind and body, a Taoist becomes a hsien, or immortal, after death. The human body is a microcosmic manifestation of the cosmos of the Taoist trinity, consisting of Chi, the breath,

Jing, the vital essence, and Shen, the spirit. Both internal and external alchemy strive to bring the three principles in harmony with the macrocosmic Tao.

An alchemist rids himself of emotional and physical excesses such as wild passion, terrible sadness, overeating, or celibacy. Through experimentation and intuition, an external alchemist must also discover an elixir of immortality. Classical elixirs used cinnabar (mercury sulfide) and were lethal poisons, but Taoist alchemists were scientific pioneers, making new discoveries in the fields of chemistry, pharmacology and physiology. Mercury was also found to be a powerful preservative for corpses and was often taken to preserve the body after death.

Internal alchemy utilizes the practitioner's own body to manufacture the "golden elixir" of immortality. Taoist yoga techniques, chi kung and internal martial arts such as tai chi chuan harmonize the energy of the body. The head, chest and abdomen serve as "cinnabar fields," each ruled by a member of the Taoist trinity and inhabited by several gods. Through meditation, an internal alchemist may call upon the gods to drive out physical and spiritual toxins and link his personal Chi to the macrocosm.

Among the Chi'n Ta, external alchemy is the province of the Wu Lung, and internal alchemy is the specialty of the Akashic Brotherhood. Taoist ideas have inspired several Awakened innovations. For example, the Wu Lung can retain the metal energies of mercury while rendering it nontoxic for their potions. More feared is the reported ability of some Akashic Brothers to manufacture poisonous substances in their own bodies, giving them lethal tears, blood and spittle. Both study Taoist methods with an eye towards immortality, and some Chi'n Ta, old beyond the mortal life span, find it safer to live in strongly Taoist areas.



CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

Crossing the boundaries between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, Chinese popular religion combines influences as old as Shang divination and incorporates every major development in China's spiritual history. Each of China's three established faiths have influenced and been influenced by the ancient belief in a Celestial Bureaucracy; in Confucianism and Taoism, they are often indivisible.

The Stove God, at the bottom of the hierarchy, lives in his portrait in the kitchen. On the Lunar New Year, his portrait is burned, sending him to Heaven to report on his assigned family. This is why the Stove God is always fed glutinous rice cakes just before his journey — to literally shut him up with the sticky offerings and delay a bad report.

The local Earth God patrols for wandering ghosts and helps guide the dead to the Underworld. A tutelary deity, he is consulted by mediums, especially for feng shui, as new buildings fall under his jurisdiction. He usually has a modest shrine, although he can have a household altar beside the Stove God. A number of modest libations are offered to him, but when misfortune strikes, the people may dismiss the Earth God as incompetent and select another.

Finally, city gods, or shih (scholars) are responsible for an entire administrative district full of Stove and Earth Gods. Unlike the other two, a city god is a specific individual: a deified role model from China's past. These gods were traditionally named after deceased scholars, officials, or generals by the imperial government. City

gods' temples are built like traditional Chinese houses, and in addition to offerings of incense, wine, and food, they may be entertained by performances at their temples or given new furnishings (in modern times, a TV set wouldn't be out of the question).

While the Jade Emperor is the head of the Celestial Bureaucracy, he is usually seen as too remote to petition directly; in the past, that was the Emperor's responsibility. In addition, there are a number of figures from China's distant past that persist in popular faith. The Earth Mother, often devalued in imperial times, has received revived interest. She is credited with creating humanity and sending figures like the Buddha and Lao-tzu to transmit her wisdom.

The Sage Kings are remembered for bringing the arts of civilization to humanity. They include Fu-hsi, "Animal Tamer," and Sui-jen, "Fire Maker." Most famous of these is the Yellow Emperor. He invented the compass needle, his wife discovered silk and his chief minister invented writing. He is also credited with the Classic of Internal Medicine, which lays out the location of acupuncture meridians and pressure points on the human body.

China's three "official" spiritual legacies have also affected popular belief. Everyone appreciates the Eight Immortals, and Kuan-Yin, a goddess of mercy who was originally a male bodhisattva, is often set upon the ancestral altar. Miatreya, the Buddha of the future, has become Malo, a generous, fat monk who wanders the world with a bag full of presents. He is often compared to the West's Santa Claus, who, like Malo, is a popular figure in Asia.

SHINTO



Whatever befalls me,
never shall I forget my love
With whom I slept
in the islands of wild ducks
The birds of the offing.
— The Nihongi

THE KAMI WAY

A religion with no founder and no central text, Shinto is essentially the faith of the Japanese people. Connected with the country's culture, history and natural features, Shinto isn't meant to be a universal religion and doesn't seek to convert foreigners. All Japanese are the children of the kami,

and need not declare an allegiance to what is already their natural heritage.

Shinto does not prescribe a particular moral code for its adherents. Instead, followers seek to purify themselves before the kami. Impurity can take many forms. First, one should never appear before the kami polluted by spilled blood. Ugliness, dirt and shameful thoughts also offend the kami. Impurity is dangerous, as it attracts maho tsukai, evil spirits from the impure Darkness World. Purification, or misogi, can include sexual abstinence, bathing, meditation and the creation of beautiful artwork.

The primary focus of Shinto is the worship of the kami. Many things can be considered kami, from heroic ancestors, gods and dragons to the buddhas and holy figures of other religions. But the kami most commonly worshiped are the nature spirits associated with a particular place or thing.

Mountains are particularly revered; Mount Fuji is the best known and one of the holiest of Japan's sacred mountains. Kami are everywhere, but outstanding features in the land bring their presence closer to people. This is often recognized by building a shrine at the sacred place. A freestanding gateway called a torii, marks larger shrines, but the kami can be acknowledged with something as simple as a piece of straw tied to a rock.

SHINTO MYTHOLOGY

In the beginning, the world is one primordial mass, but the impure, heavy parts of it descended to the earth, while the pure, clear elements floated to heaven. Between them arose the Pillar of the Land. After six generations, the Pillar brings forth Izanagi and Izanami, the god and goddess that create Japan. Unfortunately, because Izanami speaks first, their first child is a leech, which they cast adrift. Their second union creates the Japanese Archipelago, the kami of the land, and the spirit-ancestors of the Japanese people.

Izanami dies, burned by the birth of the fire god, and Izanagi goes into the Yomi-no-kuni, the Darkness World where the most impure elements of the primordial mass have fallen. He finds only maggots, decay and filth, and returns to clean himself in the ocean. When he washes his left eye, he creates the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, and when he washes his right eye, the Moon God, Tsukiyomi, comes forth. Rinsing his nostrils produces Susano-o, the trickster God of Summer Wind.

Susano-o plays terrible pranks on Amaterasu, destroying her rice crop and throwing shit under her throne. Disgusted, Amaterasu hides in the Cave of Heaven and bars the door, leaving the world without the sun. Fortunately, the kami ancestors of two clans decorate a sakaki tree with a mirror, jewels and ribbons, which lures the curious Sun Goddess out of the cave. Then, the clan ancestors bind her with rope to keep her from hiding again. She goes on to give birth to the imperial line of Japan; all Japanese emperors enact a ritual where they are symbolically reborn from the womb of the Sun Goddess.

RITUAL AND WORSHIP

Modern Japan has three types of Shinto. Shrine Shinto is the most common and is centered around the thousands of shrines that exist throughout Japan. Shrines are usually under the care of a family that has tended them for generations, although this was interrupted for a time by the Second World War. Sect Shinto revolves around thirteen organizations that devote themselves to particular forms of worship, such as the cult of Mount Fuji, and sects that combine Shinto and Confucianism. Folk Shinto includes shamanism, divination and the worship of household kami, and is often merged with Buddhist or Taoist practices.

THE KAMI TODAY

Industrialization, cultural cynicism, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have taken their toll on the kami. While arrogant Kuei-jin assume that the kami have fled, never to return, the truth is that many have moved from the Yang World to Taka-ma-gahara, the Plain of Heaven. This change suits the changing times, when many consider the kami to be conceptual rather than natural entities. Since most shen have little access to Heaven itself, many believe that the kami have been destroyed, and some have been arrogant enough to take their place. Since many of the shrines are powerful wellsprings of Chi, many sorcerers have also come to drain these places of their vitality. From their vantage point in Heaven, the kami grow angrier and angrier, particularly at the Demon People who defile their shrines with spilled blood. Soon, they may face a reckoning.

Shinto priests aren't without resources either. Many have a strong enough faith to drive away vampires and other maho tsukai who presume upon their sacred sites. A torii divides the mortal realm from the infinite realm of the kami, and a ritually pure priest can draw upon that power to annihilate a Chi'n Ta who rapes a shrine of its energies. The impurity of the act draws upon the Yomi-no-kuni, and can rot an offending wizard from the inside out.

On the other hand, if a Chi'n Ta performs misogi and enters with a pure heart, he may be granted Chi with a Resonance that brings him closer to nature. These pure spiritual energies can bring a host of minor benefits, such as good luck on a wilderness voyage or an auspicious encounter with an animal or spirit.

Originally, there was a fourth sect, State Shinto, which reasserted the emperor's divinity just as he returned to power at the dawn of the 20th century. State Shinto tied worship to nationalism and put all shrines under a central authority despite the protests of the families that had tended them for centuries. At the end of the Second World War, it was disbanded by the Allies as part of the Japanese surrender.

Shinto worship is tied into everyday life. A kami-dama is a household shrine. Offerings, candles, and tablets from other shrines are placed there. At a larger shrine, a worshiper begins by washing her hands and rinsing her mouth. Entering the gate, she places a coin in the offering box and claps her hands twice to call attention to the kami before praying. Before leaving, she makes an offering to the priest of money, food, drink or something symbolic such as a tree sprig (sometimes identified with the Pillar of the Land).

A Shinto priest performs rituals in classical Japanese, often utilizing a mirror, jewels and the branch from the sakaki tree, in memory of the return of Amataseru. The tradition also has its shamans, called miko, who serve as direct channels to the kami. Miko are women, usually blind, who naturally attract the kami. They are traditionally consulted in times of crisis, such as wars and earthquakes, or to approve of marriages or other important decisions. They are most common in rural areas, where people still believe in possession by fox spirits and other nocturnal dangers.

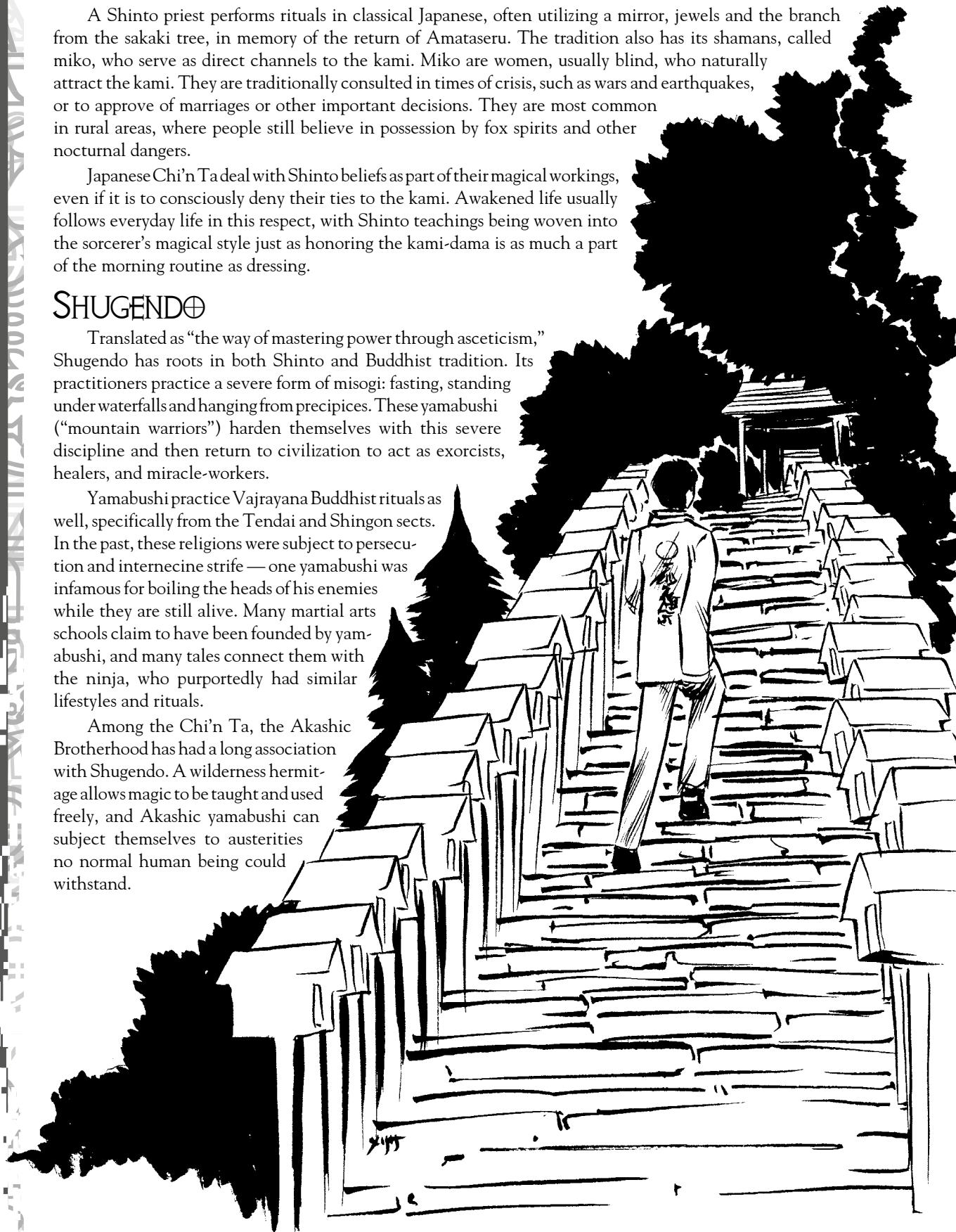
Japanese Chi'n Ta deal with Shinto beliefs as part of their magical workings, even if it is to consciously deny their ties to the kami. Awakened life usually follows everyday life in this respect, with Shinto teachings being woven into the sorcerer's magical style just as honoring the kami-dama is as much a part of the morning routine as dressing.

SHUGENDO

Translated as "the way of mastering power through asceticism," Shugendo has roots in both Shinto and Buddhist tradition. Its practitioners practice a severe form of misogi: fasting, standing under waterfalls and hanging from precipices. These yamabushi ("mountain warriors") harden themselves with this severe discipline and then return to civilization to act as exorcists, healers, and miracle-workers.

Yamabushi practice Vajrayana Buddhist rituals as well, specifically from the Tendai and Shingon sects. In the past, these religions were subject to persecution and internecine strife — one yamabushi was infamous for boiling the heads of his enemies while they are still alive. Many martial arts schools claim to have been founded by yamabushi, and many tales connect them with the ninja, who purportedly had similar lifestyles and rituals.

Among the Chi'n Ta, the Akashic Brotherhood has had a long association with Shugendo. A wilderness hermitage allows magic to be taught and used freely, and Akashic yamabushi can subject themselves to austerities no normal human being could withstand.



PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have all appeared in the Middle Kingdom. Chinese Jews are perhaps the most elusive; dating back to the Silk Road, they form one of the smallest, most obscure religious communities in their country. As Jews don't proselytize, the situation isn't likely to change.

Islam has existed throughout Asia for centuries, coming to prominence in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Muslims form distinct communities throughout China, where it was introduced through trade and the religious freedom propagated by the Mongol Yuan dynasty. The process is repeating itself; as industrialized Asia strengthens trade with the Middle East, more of its citizens convert.

Christianity has had a long and troubled history in the East. Tokugawa Japan banned the religion, often crucifying

followers, and Communist China has only recently allowed Christians to practice their faith openly. In the 21st Century, South Korea and Japan have seen a surge in conversions. Korean Christianity began its history in the hands of Koreans rather than Western missionaries; Christian churches are woven into the fabric of society as securely as Buddhist monasteries. Christian weddings are popular in Japan, no matter what faith the bride and groom practice.

Both Christianity and Islam preach exclusivity — that one can't be a good Christian while honoring local gods or the Tao. This is a foreign concept to most Asians and thus a barrier to conversion. Furthermore, faiths such as Hinduism and Shinto are so tied to everyday life that being a Christian or Muslim might alienate a convert from her own culture.

SYNCRETISM

Most people in the Middle Kingdom honor several religions at once. These mixed practices often result in new faiths emerging when a charismatic individual weaves the varied spiritual threads of the land into a new pattern. Called syncretism, this process has spawned Asia's oldest faiths, such as religious Taoism, as well as newer beliefs that combine Christianity, Shinto and pop psychology.

Syncretic movements often begin when one person claims to have had a special revelation from the gods. What often forms is part personality cult, part mystical discipline, and can be beneficial or dangerous depending on the will of the leader and the zeal of her followers. For example, members of Aum Shinrikyo, which combined Hindu and Shinto beliefs, committed mass murder with poisonous gas in preparation for a coming apocalypse. More benign is the Venerable Earth Mother movement in Taiwan. Members have revived the idea of the Creator Goddess and claim that all religious wisdom is a message to her suffering children.

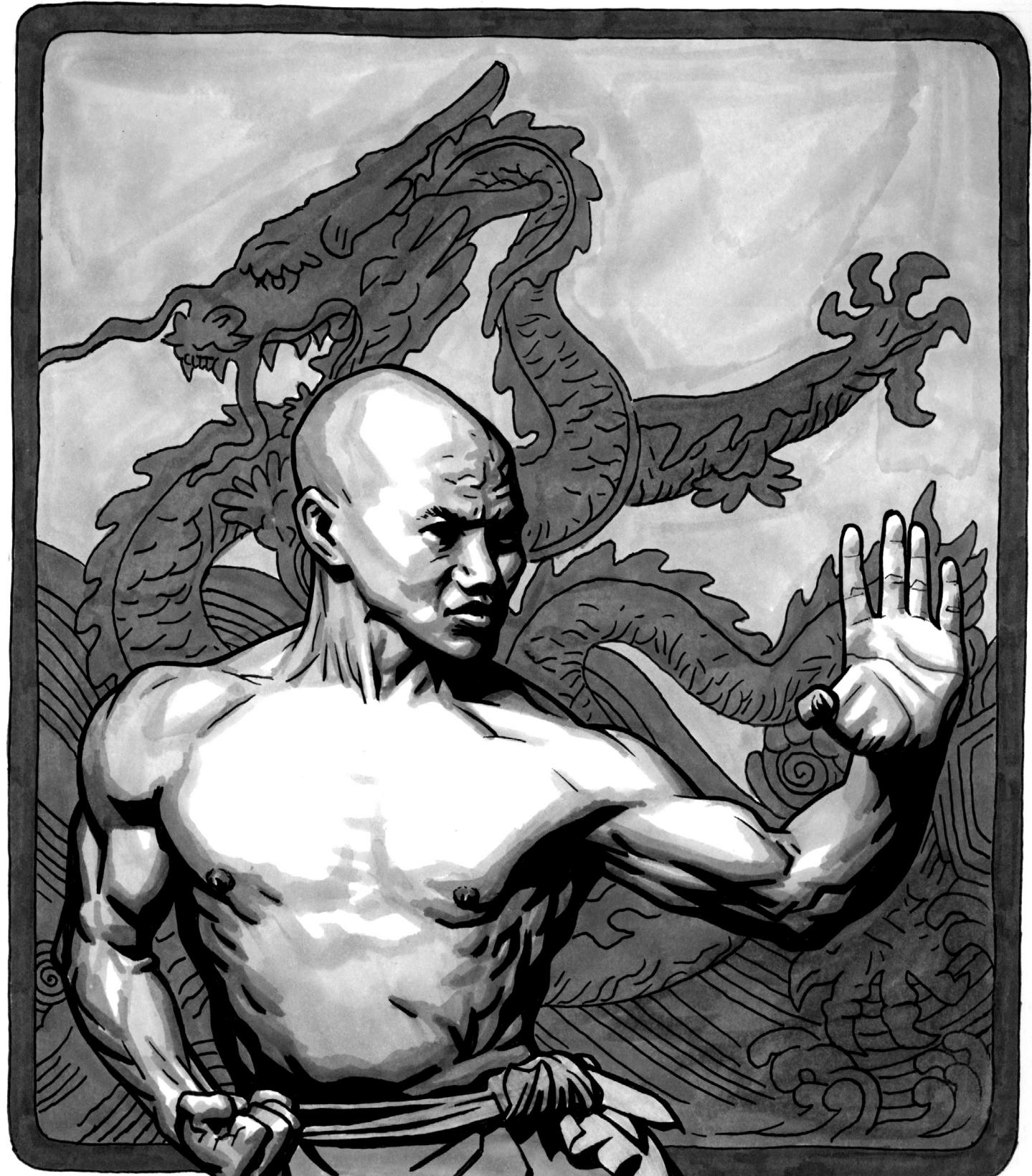
Omoto-kyo, a syncretic Japanese faith, was founded by Deguchi Nao. Driven to despair by her daughter's madness in 1892, she allegedly received a vision from Tenchi-kane-no-kami, the "Great God of the Universe." In this vision, the world would be cleansed after the coming of a messiah. In 1898, a young ascetic met Deguchi Nao and was proclaimed as the one, changing his name to Deguchi Onisaburo. He claimed that his soul had left

his body and learned the secrets of the universe while he meditated in a mountain cave.

Omoto-kyo claimed that the kami Susano-o and Kunikotachi-no-Mikoto were the rightful rulers of heaven, driven out by evil spirits. Similarly, Deguchi Onisaburo believed that he was the rightful emperor of Japan, the true Dalai Lama, and Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future. He was arrested several times by the imperial government for making these claims.

One follower of Omoto-kyo was Ueshiba Morihei, founder of the martial art of Aikido. There are many stories of Ueshiba throwing people without touching them, turning invisible, and moving from place to place without crossing the intervening distance (he reportedly did this to appear behind a firing squad he had dared to take aim at him). Since most of these accounts come from his students, the truth of the matter is questionable.

Syncretism is very popular among the Chi'n Ta for two reasons. First of all, such faiths are very similar to what the Awakened already do. For example, the Akashic Brotherhood borrows its practices from Buddhist, Taoist, and Shinto sources but is guided by an inspiration (magic) that transcends the orthodoxy of each. Second, many of these religions emphasize supernatural experiences. This gives the Lightning People a crop of believers around whom it is safe to use powerful magic. Combined with the tangible benefits of potential acolytes and bodyguards, it isn't uncommon for a crafty wizard to play the messiah himself....



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CHAPTER THREE. THE LIGHTNING PEOPLE



Namebreakers. Lightning People. Descriptions of the Middle Kingdom's magi imply power and recklessness. To the shen, the Chi'n Ta are like a garden of dragons; the rare flowers of wisdom they offer hide coils that can snare the unwary.

Until recently, four magical societies kept a rough harmony in Asia. While the Akashic Brotherhood ceaselessly promoted its philosophies, the Wu Lung fought them, striving to keep the East under the heel of Chinese culture. In the shadows, the Wu-Keng appeased the Yama Kings with secret rites and personal sacrifice. Finally, the Five Metal Dragons preserved the sciences

from the whims of selfish sorcerers and helped the Sleepers that were trapped in sorcerers' wars.

Now, the balance has been lost. The Five Metal Dragons run rampant over a broken world. The Akashic Brotherhood is struggling to survive, let alone grow, and the maimed Wall has forced the Wu Lung to turn to them for support. In the darkness of cities like Hong Kong, a war is brewing between rival sects of shamans, and the Wu-Keng stand poised for triumph — or destruction.

But in the slums of Asia's cities, new hope emerges. peasant sorcerers are reclaiming the ancient ways, not to arm themselves for ideological war but to survive in a spiritually impoverished peace. Perhaps they hold the secret of renewal: to fight for people, instead of ideas.

HISTORY



Like the shen, the Chi'n Ta see history as a cycle. While the Wheel of Ages spins, the world careens towards annihilation to prepare itself for a new beginning. However, this is cold comfort for the average person; the average Lightning Person sees only the loss of her companions and her dreams in a cycle that spans millennia.

A TURNING OF THE WHEEL: THE FIRST AGE

The Chi'n Ta have many metaphors for the First Age. To Hindu mystics, it was the time when existence had merged with the Brahman, and Shiva waited for the world to be drawn from his navel. China remembers Pangu, the creator whose body became the cosmos. Cosmic eggs, primordial

chaos and ancient sacrifices are images that put a face on the unknowable perfection of the First Age.

A few sorcerers talk about a time before even this, when a previous creation healed its wounds to return to the infinite. The Akashic Brotherhood claim to come from this very realm; Hindu and Buddhist sages speak of the time before this cycle, and of the Iron Age to come, when creation will suffer a blow that can only be healed by returning to the infinite.

DEMONS AND SAGES: THE SECOND AGE

In time, the perfect unity of the First Age divided into Yin and Yang. From their opposition, change, creation and destruction took hold of the world.

It was then that the Tiger, Phoenix, and Dragon appeared in the world. To regulate the Wheel of Ages, the Three Ministers took up the duties of creation, preservation and destruction, and through their interplay they created the Five Elements and their permutations, the Ten Thousand Things.

Unfortunately, some of the spirits turned against the Tapestry itself, devouring Chi and corrupting the spirit worlds. The greatest of these called themselves the Yama Kings, and created hells in the far corners of the Tapestry. In response, the hengeyokai, hsien, and Wan Xian were created to guard Creation against them.

It was then that the Awakened came into the world. The first mystics brought humanity the secrets of life and death so that they might provide for themselves where Heaven had failed them. Sui-jen, the Fire Bringer, Na Kua, who repaired the heavens and Fu Hsi the Animal Tamer put divine power into mortal hands. These primordial heroes were called the Sheng; the oracle-bone language represents them as a figure with a large ear and a small mouth. A sage, then, was one

who heard Heaven's wisdom but showed discretion when he shared it with the world.

THE METAPHYSIC TRINITY IN THE EAST

Tiger, Dragon and Phoenix are part of the common paradigm of the Middle Kingdom, though they are not always given the titles assigned them by the Wu Lung and Akashic Brotherhood. The hengeyokai, Kuei-jin and hsien all have their own names and theories; for example, the Kuei-jin assign the Scarlet Queen the portfolio of Yang.

In the East, the Metaphysic Trinity also represents internal qualities that must be brought into harmony. A strong Yin influence, called Jhor by certain Indian and Middle Eastern magi, can draw Chi'n Ta into murder and corruption, and even the Wu Lung know that Legalist excesses can put them under Phoenix's thrall. Akashics call these forces the Sam Chien, or "three-fold battle," while the Wu Lung know them as the Three Ministers or Three Warring Kingdoms. The Wu-Keng are simply content to name each thing as it manifests, although they know the rising power of Dragon and his ministers all too well.

Tiger, also called Snow Leopard or Pearly Tiger, is the Minister of Yang, full of creative and chaotic power. Many hengeyokai bear his legacy, bursting with Yang Chi and untamed life.

It is said that Tiger punished the Wan Xian by denying them his pure essence, forcing the vampires to consume Yang Chi that had been regulated and tainted by Phoenix. Whatever the case, hengeyokai often turn their hand against the Demon People for their spiritual corruption.



Phoenix is sometimes called the Scarlet Queen or is identified with Garuda, the bird that transports Vishnu the Preserver between Heaven and Earth. Like Garuda, Phoenix brings order to the world; as the Minister who conveys Heaven's will, she preserves Tiger's wild creations and regulates Dragon's destruction.

Dragon, called Ebon Dragon by the Kuei-jin, is Minister of Destruction. The Minister of Yin, Dragon is creation's judge; in the guise of Yama and Hun Dun, Dragon purges the Wheel of its flaws so that they do not impede its turning.

In the Second Age, Dragon's ministers turned against him, forsaking their duty to cleanse the world and using their powers to consume its Chi rather than its imperfection. The corrupting hunger of these Yama Kings caused Phoenix to harry him, binding him with Heaven's commands. Now, the Dragon of Balance is referred to as the Wyrm or the Centipede, and represents the defiling forces of the world — the very essence of Yomi.

Primal mystics argue that Dragon has gone mad and seeks to corrupt the world. However, Akashics and Wu Lung argue that his servants are evil because Phoenix has him too tightly bound to act. If Dragon were allowed to resume his duties, they assert, he would correct his wayward helpers. Some Akashics take this even further and claim that the Yama Kings' madness comes from a longing for the permanence that Phoenix offers. Their theft of Chi is an attempt to give themselves the substance that their spiritual natures and destructive portfolios can never grant.

KAJA

Similar to Enochian in the Western tradition, Kaja is revered as a divine language by the Chi'n Ta. In literate societies, sorcerers struggle to learn its characters to garner respect from the shen and communicate with Heaven. While many mystics prefer Sanskrit or classical Chinese, some of the most ancient classics on the nature of magic and the Tapestry are written in this language, including the Akashic Stone Sutra and the most revered classic of the Wu Lung.

According to the Wu Lung, the Yellow Emperor first learned Kaja from the Celestial Ministers. Knowing the dangers that revealing the secrets of divine communication would bring, but convinced of writing's utility, the Yellow Emperor allowed his First Minister to adapt the script into a more primitive form that became the basis for written language. Others maintain that Kaja is a manifestation of the Vedas' vibrations, or that it is simply an ancient language that the gods remember and respect. The Awakened do not have the knowledge to use Kaja as a living language; that facility belongs solely to the Kuei-jin. Instead, key phrases and their mystical meanings are learned by rote. Facility with Kaja calligraphy is usually considered to be a prerequisite for dealing with spirits or invoking Heaven's greatest favors. For example, the petition to perform tsuiho requires several hundred characters' worth of Kaja, brushed with the greatest precision. The gods frown on an artless request.



FIVE AUGUST EMPERORS: THE THIRD AGE

The Sheng divided into shamans and philosophers. The former became the protectors of the common people, while the latter styled themselves enlightened rulers after the model of the August Personage of Jade. The greatest of these was the Yellow Emperor, who learned the secret of writing from the Celestial Bureaucracy. His legendary descendants turned the Awakened scholars into the Wu Lung.

These Five Emperors shared the arts of civilization with the people. When primal sorcery incorporated these new philosophies, they armed the Yama Kings with intellectual tools to beguile and corrupt.

The peasant wu defended the people from the increasing chaos of the spirit worlds. Marauding Wan Xian and the Yama Kings' minions tested the wu's resolve, and dark spirits twisted the love that shamans had for the gods.

KALI'S LAUGHTER: THE FOURTH AGE

Rapacious vampires and shapeshifters were answered with Heaven's curse, and the Wall buttressed the spirit worlds against their interference. Peasant wu and scholar sorcerers became ever jealous of each other's powers. Their struggles tore apart the civilization that had flourished under the Five Emperors. The Yama Kings took advantage of the disarray and seeded the Middle Kingdom with their minions. It was a terrifying time to be mortal.

The Akashic Brotherhood appeared in Tibet, India and China. At first, native sorcery held them at bay, but their methods, based on internal power, became widely accepted by a populace that had tired of suffering at the whims of the gods. In 900 B.C., the Akashayana encountered the ancestors of the Euthanatoi; for the next five centuries, the Himalayan Wars transformed them from ascetics into warriors.

During the Shang dynasty, the combined influence of the Akashic Brotherhood and the Wu Lung had left the peasant wu with few resources with which to combat the Yama Kings. While noble and monastic sorcerers refused to acknowledge the threat, demons ravaged the forgotten peasantry. In desperation, the most powerful wu sacrificed themselves to the Yama King Ku of the Thousand Tears and turned the demons' avarice away from the Middle Kingdom and onto themselves.

By the time of the Chou dynasty, the Wu-Keng had turned from Heaven to hell. Their powers were still used to help the common people, but gone was the obligation to protect them from supernatural threats. In 496 B.C., the Searing Wind sect of the Wan Xian attempted to take Mount Kailas, said to be the physical remnant of Mount Meru on earth. When the Akashic Brotherhood rose to defend their spiritual homeland, the Searing Wind struck an alliance with

Yi Han, a Yomi-corrupted Wu Lung. His involvement escalated the conflict into the Dragon River War. In A.D. 480, Yi Han and his Wan Kuei allies wove a mighty enchantment that caused 10 suns to burn in the sky, killing their enemies' mortal armies with drought and thirst. In the burning, sunlit nights, Wu-Keng sacrificial pits filled with the desiccated bodies of Wu Lung and Akashayana alike.

That year, a mysterious warrior-sage called Yi appeared. This prodigy combined the ancient sorcery of the Sheng with a martial prowess that had heretofore only been seen among Akashic warriors. With nine arrows, he undid Yi Han's magic and scattered the combatants with primal wizardry and a great dragon. Both the Wu Lung and Akashic Brotherhood attempted to recruit the hero; instead, he created an army of followers, trained to combat supernatural evil. These Shih still wander the Middle Kingdom. Despite a shared origin, they treat wicked Namebreakers as mercilessly as any other supernatural evildoer.

Although Yi's Celestial Army purged the Chou of supernatural influence, it also weakened it to mortal failure; no sorcery could be used to prop up the failing kingdom from invasion and subversion. In the years of drought that folmeditationlowed the Dragon River War, many Wu Lung abandoned the Chou state to use their budding science in the service of the people. Soon, these Dalou'laoshi quarreled with the Wu-Keng, whose peasant sorcery they despised. Other sorcerers grew suspicious of the group's strange machines and potions.

THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE

From its construction, the Shaolin Temple was infested with vampires and ghosts who fed off the energies of the monks while pursuing a decidedly unorthodox vision of enlightenment. Shaolin monks were noted for their poor health and sickly appearance because of constant feeding by the vampire "bodhisattvas" who ruled over them.

All of this changed in A.D. 521, when the Indian monk Bodhidharma came to the temple. Even the most enlightened shen suffered under the holy man's searing presence. Overcome with shame, the shen fled. Bodhidharma taught the monks special exercises to combat the spiritual and physical wasting they had suffered under their old masters. This attracted the Akashic Brotherhood, who sent several promising Disciples to study with the sage. After Bodhidharma had designated his successor, a tide of Akashics monks arrived to study beside their Sleeper counterparts. Inspired by the Mahayana teaching of universal enlightenment, the Kannagara vowed to accept any sentient being that wished to study at the monastery. With this idealistic — but ultimately doomed — decree, the Shaolin Temple united the shen in a peace that has never been equaled in the Middle Kingdom.

A HUNDRED SCHOOLS

After the fall of the Chou, the Warring States period provided a fertile ground for new ideas. Divination, swordsmanship and engines of destruction took to the battlefield as Chi'n Ta used their expertise in the service of feudal lords. The Akashic Brotherhood converted the first Shi-Ren and welcomed the Li-Hai, who faced persecution from the Confucian Wu Lung. The Dragon Wizards split into a thousand small cabals, each struggling to unite China under one ruler.

In 221 B.C., the Dragon Wizard Fu Xia prevailed, using the young ruler of Qin and Dalou'laoshi allies to forge the Qin Empire and unite the Wu Lung under a Magical Bureaucracy. The Burning of the Books consolidated knowledge in the Wu Lung's hands and weakened their enemies. Even the Dalou'laoshi were hard-pressed to oppose the Dragon Emperor when the primitive science they nurtured during the Warring States period went up in flames.

THE BURNING TIGER WAR

Under the control of the Wu Lung, the ensuing Han dynasty became a difficult regime for their rivals to live under. In 190 B.C., the Dalou'laoshi negotiated the Silk Accord and quietly grew wealthy and strong by trading with like-minded Daedaleans in Rome. When Akashic warriors led by the Vajrapani Fan Fu (Smoke Tiger) seized the Silk Road to force a territorial settlement with the Wu Lung, the Stone People contributed advisors and war machines to assist the Tiger Lord's armies.

In A.D. 120, the Infernalist Tau-tse summoned a demon army to harry all sides and aggravate the conflict. The Stone People lost face before their Western counterparts, who expected them to keep their end of the Silk Road secure. After the Shi-Ren Te Kwan and Zhen Ba banished the Infernal forces, the Dalou'laoshi moved in, expelling the Akashayana and offering the Wu Lung tribute from the Roman Artisans. This set the pattern for relations between the three for over 1,000 years.

Over the next 600 years, the Akashics used their ties to Buddhism and Taoism to form small monastic communities throughout Asia. Unknown to them, they were helped by the Wu-Keng, who wanted a group strong enough to contest

Wu Lung supremacy. In A.D. 529 they occupied the Shaolin Temple, and in a gesture of magnanimity they declared that all who sincerely looked for enlightenment could study there. Wan Kuei, ghosts, and other, stranger things shared the monastery with the Kannagara and mortal monks.

From 590 onward, the Akashic Brotherhood grew stronger through its monasteries. With the silent encouragement of the Wu-Keng, monks became powerful landholders with innumerable peasant vassals. When the Wu Lung regained control of the Emperor in 618, they wasted no time attacking the Shaolin

Temple. Spectacular battles between Vajrapani temple guards and Tiger School warriors inspired a thousand legends about the martial arts.

Subsequent attacks by the Wu Lung and Stone People destroyed the monastery several times.

To guard against the destruction of their traditions, Akashic Brothers settled Japan, far from the

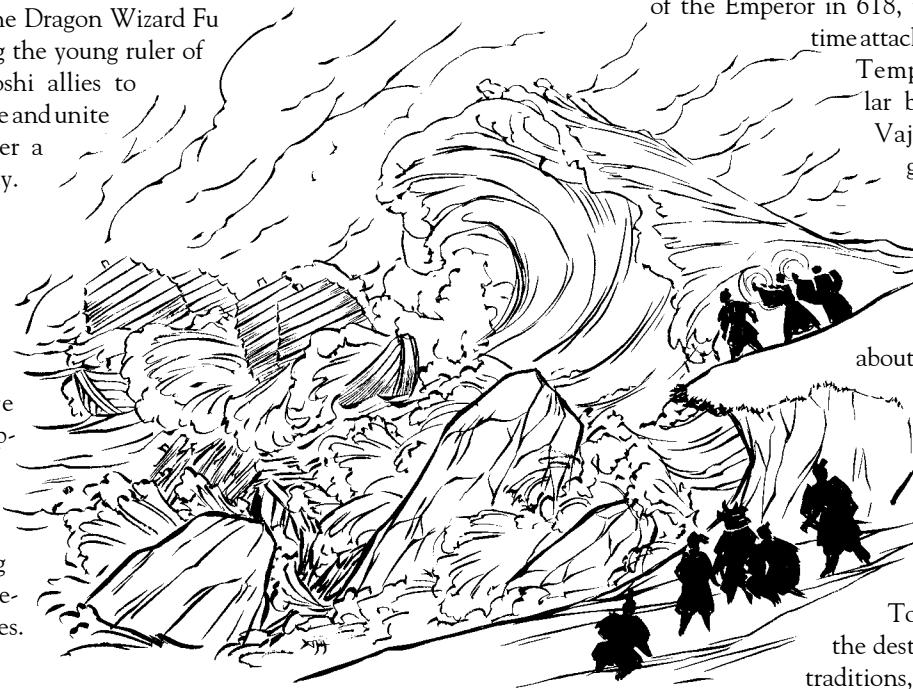
seat of the conflict. At first, they had little contact with the native shaman-queens and Shinto mystics and were left to practice their beliefs in peace.

BARBARIANS AND EMPERORS

From the fall of the Tang dynasty in 907 to the 13th century, the Chi'n Ta enjoyed a fragile peace, as weak emperors provided little opportunity for any side to dominate the others. In 1279 the Mongols invaded, supported by shamans that were adept at circumventing magical resistance.

In desperation, the Akashic Brother Yu Lung ("Jade Dragon") made a pact with the Yama Kings. Yu Lung learned dark alchemy from his patrons and used it to infect the invaders with a virulent plague. When the Jade Dragon sacrificed his Brothers to the disease, his betrayal was revealed. The Warring Fist helped Mongol shamans find a cure for the plague and drove their former Brother into exile. In gratitude, the Mongols promoted Vajrayana Buddhism and allowed the Akashics more freedom than either the Wu Lung or Stone People.

From 1274 to 1281, Mongol efforts to invade Japan were thwarted by Japanese Akashics, straining relations



with the mainland branch of the sect. However, the event that gives the Kamikaze War its name was not created by any sorcerer, but seemed to arise from the kami of the islands themselves. The Divine Wind inspired native and Akashic mystics to band together out of love for their common home.

In 1325, the beleaguered Stone People attended the Convention of the White Tower. Several Legalist scholars from the Wu Lung joined them, looking for allies to act against the Mongols. Relations between the two societies were strained by the meeting; most Wu Lung despised the idea of asking for “barbarian” help. Afterward, the Dalou’laoshi migrated to coastal cities and garrisoned overland trade routes, to better receive help from Western Artificers. The Dalou’laoshi that remained helped the Wu Lung take revenge upon the Akashic Brotherhood.

Enraged by their complicity with Mongol rule, the Wu Lung and Dalou’laoshi employed rockets, flying machines and strong elemental magic to lash out at the Warring Fists. The Screaming Ghost Purge would have wiped the Brotherhood out were it not for the influence of the Wu-Keng. A number of peasant rebellions defied Mongol rule and neither the Stone People nor the Dragon Wizards could control them. Only the Akashics were permitted to forge ties with rebel groups such as the Red Turbans. Thus, when the first Ming emperor ascended to the throne in the 1368, he was supported by Shi-Ren aristocrats and Vajrapani guards.

When the Western Traditions came to China, it appeared as if the Akashic Brotherhood was all powerful. Much to the chagrin of the Wu Lung, their rivals were invited to the Grand Convocation first. This simply reaffirmed the Dragon Wizards’ opinion that the Westerners were fools, especially since all was not as it seemed.

Despite appearances, the Akashic grip on power was a failure almost as soon as it had started. The Wu Lung surrounded the emperor with corrupt ministers and sent their most accomplished wizards to Manchuria to assist the invasion plans of the Manchus. In 1644, the insular, weak and corrupt Ming state fell to Manchurian troops and their Wu Lung patrons. The Dragon Wizards exacted vengeance upon the Akashic Brotherhood, accompanying the Qing invasion of Tibet to destroy some of the Brothers’ oldest strongholds. Finally, in 1735, the Shaolin Temple was leveled by Wu Lung. Shen monks who believed that the Akashayana had betrayed their vows to the monastery assisted them.

OPIUM AND REVOLUTION: THE FIFTH AGE

With the help of the Stone People, the Qing made the same mistakes as their predecessors. Dalou’laoshi traders hid the realities of colonial power from the imperial court. Instead of the expected tribute, the Qing received opium and gunfire. During the Boxer Rebellion, the Wu Lung and the Akashic

THE GOLDEN DRAGON SOCIETY

When the Shaolin Temple was destroyed, 18 monks fled to safe houses operated by the Shi-Ren. Many formed secret societies with the aim of overthrowing the Qing and eradicating Western influence. One of the survivors, the Vajrapani warrior monk Sataghni (“Battering Ram”), fled to Japan. In 1755, he and his host, the Shi-Ren Kunio Ashida, founded the Golden Dragon Society. As one of the Awakened, he gave the group a purpose greater than simple nationalism and directed them to fight the Five Metal Dragons “by making their strengths our own.”

After the Boxer Rebellion and the Meiji Restoration, the Golden Dragons used sorcery and blackmail to control native merchants who dealt with the West. During the Second World War, the society resisted the national divisions that plagued the Brotherhood; afterwards, their investments in Japan and Hong Kong gave them control of a bank and several film studios in the West as well as the East. Originally intending to use these studios to generate propaganda, the Golden Dragons rationalized leveraging them into further acquisitions by arguing that any business that they controlled was kept out of the hands of the Syndicate.

The Golden Dragons seized other assets from that Convention. The society’s roots included criminals and revolutionaries; from that base, they grew to control a major Triad, two Yakuza gumi and a host of more obscure criminal associations.

In the early 1990s, the Golden Dragons discovered that the Syndicate had a special arrangement with a major corporation called Pentex. Investigating further, they found that Pentex was a front for an hitherto unknown magical society — one which did not subscribe to the Technocratic paradigm.

On the eve of their strike against these “followers of the Centipede,” Asian currencies collapsed, striking hardest where the Golden Dragon Society had invested the most. Doissetep, the home of the society’s dragon-heads, was destroyed. In 1998, the society jettisoned its remaining corporate chaff and reorganized, returning to its old standby: organized crime.

Today, Shi-Ren and Vajrapani make up the backbone of the Golden Dragons, although mages outside these sects and the Akashayana are sometimes recruited. Even weakened by the loss of its leaders and legitimate resources, it remains one of the largest criminal organizations in the world. Few outsiders realize how completely the Golden Dragon Society has integrated itself into Asia’s underworld. Many Kannagara, Jnani and Li-Hai would be disturbed if they found out.

Brotherhood agreed to a truce to fight their common enemy. While British guns were bad enough, the reorganization of the Dalou'laoshi into the Five Metal Dragons put the might of the global Technocracy in their very midst. In Japan, the Metal Dragons discovered guns and revolutionary politics followed Commodore Perry's expedition. Colonialism further tightened the Technocracy's grip on Asia.

The Wu-Keng merely took note of the change, smiled and ensured that the new arrangements would be favorable to them. As Hong Kong was handed over to the British and the Christian Taiping Rebellion was suppressed, the Wu-Keng felt events drift in their favor. While the Japanese stormed Manchuria, and Allied bombs struck Wu Lung strongholds across Asia, the Wu-Keng prepared to inherit China. When the Second World War pitted Japanese and Chinese Akashayana against each other, the Wu-Keng prepared to enter the spiritual vacuum and bring the old ways back to China.

As the Chou yan gathered a force to eliminate the Wu Lung once and for all, an unexpected complication arose: communism.

Technocratic elements in the revolution destroyed Zhen Di's army. The Wu Lung scurried to safety. The ancient ways were denigrated and repressed, but the Technocracy's favorites fell to the same persecution, as educated men and women were sent to fields and factories. Wars with

communists in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, allowed the Five Metal Dragons to test new technologies, but they did nothing to assist either side's efforts. After setting events in motion, they simply watched and waited, as if they were the dispassionate observers of a vast experiment.

SORROW: THE SIXTH AGE

Many shen and Chi'n Ta believe that the Sixth Age has come, although few agree on the exact time the Wheel turned. Rapid economic development has catapulted the Five Metal Dragons into a position of supremacy that no Tradition or Craft can ever equal.

The Chi'n Ta have been broken by history. The Akashic Brotherhood backed a failed quest called the Ascension War. The Wall became a barrier of shattered, screaming souls, separating the Wu Lung from their emperor and leaving a child and a troubled general to rule in his place. The Wu-Keng face final damnation while trying to drown the one hope that remains.

Tradition, Convention or Craft will not save the Lightning People. Under an enormous karmic burden, each faction has learned to do without the influence they wielded so freely in the past. Younger Chi'n Ta concern themselves with their immediate situation and try to apply the ideals of the past to ordinary life instead of magical conquest. Without conspiracies, all that remains is the self.

THE AKASHIC BROTHERHOOD



They have been misunderstood, stereotyped and maligned by the Council of Nine Traditions and other Chi'n Ta alike. Akashic Brothers can be as anything from modern samurai to pacifist monks, creating the impression that they only stand together for the convenience of the Council of Nine. Nothing could be further from the truth.

On the cusp of the Age of Sorrow, change rocks the Brotherhood. Concordia's destruction has left the Shi-Ren and Vajrapani bereft of powerful leaders and resources. At the same time, the Wu Lung prepares to take its place by the Akashayana's side, filling the gap but leaving the Warring Fist wary of their former enemies. Although balance doesn't come without change, the Brotherhood has struggled with the new realities of the end of the Ascension War.

While few understand or agree with the Brotherhood's ideals, all respect their power. Whether it is their sublime mastery of the martial arts or their ability to reshape the minds of those around them, the Akashayana's secrets come at the price of total dedication with little guidance. The lotus of enlightenment opens in the student's heart,

and the masters of the Brotherhood are loathe to tug at the petals and injure the fragile sage within.

The price of discipline without guidance is heavy. A few Brothers mistake emptiness for corruption and take the path of Yu Lung, while many quit or turn rogue. The self-reliant ones that remain cultivate personal power or understanding with a dedication that would make a Hermetic blanch. Elemental correspondences, the ties between mind, body, and spirit, and the illusion of the self are all things that a Brother seeks to understand.

HISTORY

Like many others, the Akashic Brotherhood claims to be the oldest magical society. While each sect has its own distinct rites, the Akashayana is not an alliance of convenience. Tracing their origins to the last enlightened beings of a previous Great Cycle, the Brotherhood preserves mystical secrets that may predate even the First Age.

In the previous creation, they claim, an entire people fulfilled the dream of mass Ascension. When the final destruction of the world came, they were preserved at the summit of the world mountain, Meru. Vague memories of this perfect village formed the legends of Shangri-La and

Shambhala, cities where mountain winds carried the voices of buddhas.

Unfortunately, the bliss of Meru was destroyed when material desire tempted the shen away from their duties. The Wan Xian hoarded Chi and the hengeyokai slaughtered innocents, and even the enlightened became enamoured of the Five Elements. Some worshipped the miracle-working shen, and others postulated that a Jade Mother or Lord of Heaven had secrets worth ripping from the stars. The pleasures of the earth made them fear true liberation, and soon they began to talk about eternal souls that could sustain earthly pleasure and suffering forever. Blindness and greed overtook them, and they forgot how to summon fire or grow rice. In the dark, they clawed impotently at the cold earth for which they had thrown everything away.

The Meru'ai looked from their place at the center of Creation's Wheel, and feeling compassion for the suffering masses, they took the Bodhisattva Vow, delaying their final liberation until all could be saved. This was an irreversible decision; the Wall arose to separate mortal illusions from the divine truth, and the Awakened were reborn into samsara.

The Brotherhood's teachings influenced mortal sages, but other magi were resentful of their opposition to materialism, having used the lie of the self to accrue vast power in their societies. In India, the Akashayana encountered a group of priest-kings who engineered the karma of their subjects. The Akashayana were horrified; under their system, a slave in one lifetime was a slave in all lifetimes. The Himalayan Wars that followed saw their enemies consolidate into the Euthanatoi while the Brotherhood, seeking to purge the karmic stains caused by the violence, embraced dozens of different teachings. The original sects of the Vajrapani, Kannagara, and Jnani made way for the Shi-Ren, Li-Hai, and others.

After Bodhidharma expelled the Shaolin Temple's ghosts and vampires, the Kannagara made it their headquarters. Believing in the Bodhisattva Vow, the Shaolin opened the temple to all beings who sought enlightenment. Kuei-jin, ghosts and other shen sought wisdom together.

Despite Wu Lung attacks upon the Temple, the Brotherhood prospered. When the Mongols conquered much of Asia, Jnani emissaries made peace with their shamans and undermined efforts to invade Japan. By the fall of the Yuan dynasty, the Akashic Brotherhood was the most powerful magical society in the East and thus the first to be invited to the Grand Convocation.

However, the Brotherhood-supported Ming dynasty was soon undermined by the Wu Lung, whose corrupt advisors and Manchurian armies eventually overthrew them. The Vajrapani and Shi-Ren used the Shaolin Temple as a rebel stronghold. Warring Fist "monks" battled the Qing and the Wu Lung. The Brotherhood was eventually defeated by the treachery of the temple's shen, who felt that the Akashayana had betrayed their trust by using the temple for worldly

LEXICON

Akasha: 1. The fifth element (after Earth, Water, Fire, and Air) in Hindu and Buddhist metaphysics that only exists relative to (and is necessary to the existence of) the other four. 2. An honorific given to the Ascended of the Brotherhood, who are considered to have merged with this element. 3. Ascension, the union with Akasha, the energy of impermanence and interconnectedness.

Akashakarma: 1. The impressions all beings make upon the fabric of the Tapestry with their actions, tangible to Akashayana. Called the Akashic Record by Western Brothers. 2. The passive (Yin) principle of Akashic philosophy, similar to the Taoist *wu-wei*.

Akashayana Sangha: "The Order of the Vehicle of Akasha." The name that mages of the Tradition use among themselves. "Sangha" more strictly refers to the Kannagara monastic order. "Akashayana" is used on its own as well, to emphasize that each Brother is a vehicle for the Akasha.

Bodhicitta: The Avatar. Not an indestructible soul, but the concept and feeling of enlightenment that speaks to the mage.

Bodhimandala: Also Tao Chang, Dojo or Dojang. A Chantry.

Bodhisattva: In Akashic usage, an Oracle; one who has refused final enlightenment to help others attain it.

Drahma: The short form of Draladharma, a hybridized Tibetan/Sanskrit term meaning, roughly, "the law of transcending the enemy." The active (Yang) principle in Akashic philosophy.

Kannagara: An ascetic faction that upholds the old traditions of the Brotherhood.

Lin Shen: "Forest Spirit." A Jnani hermit. Sometimes a euphemism for a Brotherhood assassin.

Lung-ta: Also called the Kai-lin, or windhorse. A spirit aligned with the Li-Hai and some hengeyokai, associated with the Maya Realm, the stars and enigmas.

Meru'ai: The people of Meru, the oldest name for the Akashayana.

Phoenix Robes: Alternate name for the Kannagara.

Rinpoche: A title for a Brother who was a Brother in a previous life. Also called a "Tulku."

Santana: The self. Literally, "stream." The Akashayana believes that the self is in constant flux and intertwined with the Ten Thousand Things such that it cannot be said to have an independent existence.

Tao-Shih: "Way Scholar/Warrior." A Do specialist within the Brotherhood.

Warring Fist: 1. Wu Ch'uan, the martial art of the Vajrapani. 2. A derogatory nickname for the Vajrapani and the Brotherhood as a whole.

gain. The Shi-Ren formed secret societies and the Vajrapani settled in Okinawa.

However, by 1900, the growing Technocratic threat had put an end to open warfare between the Akashayana and the Wu Lung, as both sides supported the Boxer Rebellion in a last ditch attempt to remove Western influence from the Middle Kingdom. Unfortunately, the Five Metal Dragons were an Eastern as well as Western phenomenon; neither the Brotherhood nor the Dragon Wizards were prepared for the treachery of their own people. Akashayana and Wu Lung alike found that their martial magic failed against the rifles of the enemy. The paradigm had changed.

Subsequent wars almost tore the Brotherhood apart, as the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Tibetan arms of the Tradition were divided between nation and Brotherhood. In 1950, Kannagara Jou Shan (Gentle Mountain) came out of seclusion and united the Akashayana under the goal of spreading its teachings to the West.

Today, the modern Brotherhood struggles with its new allies, the Wu Lung, as well as an increasing rivalry between the monastic and secular arms of the sect. The politicians and samurai of the Brotherhood chafe under a priesthood that they find increasingly irrelevant to the realities of modern life. The Wu Lung, who hold no love for the monks, aggravate the situation.

AKASHIC PHILOSOPHY

The Akashayana believe that materialism and selfishness bind human beings to Samsara, the Brotherhood's conception of the consensus. This creates suffering and disharmony. However, by practicing Do, living in balance with Akashakarma, and acting in accord with the Drahma, the Brotherhood can free themselves from Samsara's chains. By living in harmony with the Great Cycle, Akashayana can transcend the self.

DRAHMA

The Yang principle of the Brotherhood's philosophy, Drahma is a contraction of Draladharma, a Tibetan/Sanskrit term that translates as the "law of transcending the enemy." Doing Drahma means acting with the best moral intentions without pitting force against force. Ideally, a Brother practicing Drahma has no enemies, because she never prevents a foe from acting: Instead, an enemy's aggression reaps its karmic penalties without harming her. Similarly, every problem has an ethical and efficient answer, provided that the Brother acts without selfishness and lets himself become one with the task at hand.

DO: PEN AND SWORD IN ACCORD

Do is the application of Drahma to the mind and body. While the martial applications of Do are impressive, the art itself is meant to be applied to any activity that engages thoughts, emotions and actions. The student becomes

sensitive to the local activities of Yin and Yang and their diffusion into fire, earth, metal, water, and wood and adapts her actions to complement them. By losing oneself in action and becoming part of the Tapestry, the Tao Shih's actions conduct immense power — they become a manifestation of the Wheel itself. This doesn't mean that these actions are always gentle. In combat, a Warring Fist "naturally" strikes at openings in an enemy's defense with the power of a stone thrown down a well.

The Brotherhood takes few students outside of its ranks; those it accepts must show impeccable character and discipline. Further, any student must be able to incorporate the Akashic paradigm into their mundane and magical actions.

AKASHAKARITA: THE RECORD OF THE SAGES

An Akashayana learns to read the impressions that thoughts and actions leave on the Tapestry. Called Akashakarma, these impressions guide the weave of the tapestry the way riverbeds guide the world's waters. An Akashayana can most easily sense the traces of the Sangha, though a powerful Resonance from any source can sometimes be stronger. The Record can be sensed by a Brother who empties himself of egotistical concerns. In this manner, he shares the thoughts of other Akashayana and learns how to yield and redirect the forces that surround him. This manifests as leaps of intuition, bursts of knowledge, and — rarely — powerful visions from the past lives of other members of the Brotherhood.

Chanting mantras and sutras, reading sacred texts and writing in Kaja breaks the barrier between the Brother's thoughts and the Tapestry. Combined with meditation that empties the conscious mind, these practices open the impressions of Akashakarma to a Brother. Communion with the

A WAY OF LIFE

Tao Shih (practitioners of Do) use their skills for more than fighting or magic. Learning how to incorporate metaphysical forces into everyday life is a benefit in a variety of efforts.

Optionally, if a Tao Shih spends one Willpower in the attempt, she can roll her Do rating to add successes to another Ability that she already knows. These Abilities are restricted to: Athletics, Awareness, Dodge, Enigmas, Etiquette, Intuition, Leadership, Medicine, Meditation, Melee, Stealth and Survival. The difficulty is the same as normal, but the character may not spend another Willpower point for an automatic success.

The Storyteller can add other Abilities to the list, but they can never involve high technology (i.e. guns, although Storytellers should bend the rules for that rare player who wants an enlightened motorcycle repairman).



Akashic Record is the simplest application of this practice. With greater enlightenment, a Brother can reach beyond the Sangha, and all minds and deeds can be sensed.

AKASHIC SECTS

As descendants of the Meru'ai, the Akashayana emulate their ancestors by attempting to perfect a way of life. In the past, entire villages were devoted to the Brotherhood's teachings, with each sect filling a particular social role. These days, society is too focused on the Technocratic paradigm, so each sect adapts a particular role in society to their own beliefs. Each provides a living balance to their Celestial Minister and is balanced by it in return.

The Kannagara dwell on the impermanence of the self to counter the stultifying influence of the Phoenix, the Vajrapani turn the destructive tendencies of the Dragon into constructive action in the world, and the Jnani discipline the wild Yang of the Tiger by taking it into themselves. The Li-Hai act as a balancing force to the rest of the Brotherhood; their patron, called the Kai-lin or Lung-ta lives in dreams or in the most esoteric reaches of Heaven; legend has it that he only comes down from Heaven to assist the most enlightened Brothers.

THE KANNAGARA

The monastic leadership of the Akashic Brotherhood, the Kannagara study the Great Cycle under the auspices of the Phoenix. Under a rule of poverty and celibacy, they loosen ties to the self to open themselves to the Akasha. All Akashayana become monks for a brief period of time, and some join later in life after retiring from another sect (this is especially popular for Japanese Vajrapani). Also called the Phoenix Robes, the monks track Brothers through their incarnations and lead efforts to bring those who are unaware of their spiritual ancestry back to the fold.

Searching for Samadhi through self-annihilation and asceticism, the Kannagara represent the side of the Brotherhood that most Westerners are familiar with through both popular stereotype and their roles as representatives of the Tradition. As Shaolin monks, they promoted Do as a path to self-discipline as well as martial prowess. Away from Western

SENSING AKASHAKARITA

A Mind ••, Spirit • rote is all that is necessary to access the Sangha through the Record. This does not constitute true telepathy; rather, the Brother receives all of the impressions about an event after it has occurred. The information manifests as a vague sort of urge or an intuitive flash. Finding a specific person or receiving clear impressions requires four or more successes. The past is reached through the recollections that modern Akashayana have about their previous incarnations. This method can reach beyond the Brotherhood, but in game terms simply involves using an effect of the appropriate Sphere and rank.

An Akashic mage can also look for specific information about another Brother, though it is rude to do so without permission, and most experienced Akashayana are skilled at concealing their private thoughts from telepathic perusal.

Plumbing the depths of the Record is a common meditation technique among the Akashayana, although Quiet often follows an inexperienced mage who attempts to open his mind without taming his inner demons.

eyes, their decisions are often questioned, particularly by the Vajrapani, the Shi-Ren (who believe that the monks don't deal with practical matters) and the Li-Hai (who question everything). As the Phoenix Robes have accepted the formerly hated Wu Lung into the fold, some feel that it is only a matter of time until either the power hunger of the Dragon Wizards or the outrage of the rest of the Warring Fist topples monastic rule.

THE VAJRAPANI

If the Kannagara is the mind of the Brotherhood, the Vajrapani are its callused hands. As instigators of the Himalayan Wars and the fall of the Shaolin Temple, the Warring Fist is noted for its unapologetic attempts to meddle in Sleeper affairs. Their 36 families ("Scales of the Dragon" or "Banners") have adapted their way of life to a variety of different cultures, from Japanese samurai clans to vice lords on the streets of Macau. Members are taught within the family, serving a grueling apprenticeship under several uncles and aunts in armed and unarmed combat, the magical arts and the strategies of business, larceny and war. They also aggressively "adopt" promising Orphans from the areas they control.

The Vajrapani focus their power through the martial side of Do, oaths of service and purification rituals. Attention to duty diminishes the importance of the self, and purification (symbolic washing, fasting and other rites) removes karmic stains from the mind and body.

THE JNANI

Hermits and shamans, the Wu Shan represent the Akashayana in dealings with other shen. The Mountain Wizards practice internal alchemy and astrology, and cling to Dragon Nests in the unexplored areas of the Middle Kingdom. Jnani typically take apprentices only after observing them from afar, and accept them if they can both find the reclusive Chi'n Ta and survive life in the wilderness. When called upon, these yogis use their secret knowledge of the supernatural world for the Brotherhood's benefit in encounters with the Kuei-jin, hengeyokai and other shen. While they are often derided as poor cousins of the Dreamspeakers, any conversation about the Spirit Arts soon reveals vast differences.

The Jnani believe that every person is a microcosm of the Tapestry. By understanding the self, one understands the universe. Taoist, Tibetan and Shinto Arts guide the discipline of the invisible world through the discipline of the mind and body. The Jnani's patron, called the Tiger or Snow Leopard, yokes the microcosm of the self to the macrocosm of the Yang World.

Well established throughout Asia, the Jnani have recently begun to leave the mountains and enter the cities. Younger members of this sect reason that cities have a natural order all their own and are now so large that a hermit could lose himself in the masses as easily as in the wastes. They can be found wandering a shantytown or sitting at the base of a steel tower with a begging bowl in hand.

THE LI-HAI

What distinguishes the Li-Hai from Orphan iconoclasts is their commitment to the basics of Akashayana philosophy, even though the means they use to honor these ideals are wildly divergent from the rest of the Tradition. A Li-Hai master might advise a Western student to don a three-piece suit instead of a robe for ceremonies, or incorporate boxing (or baseball!) into Do training. Function, not form, is what concerns these Akashayana.

The Li-Hai are also famous for their "aggressive pacifism." While the Li-Hai abhor violence, they don't ascribe to the idea of passive resistance; their unorthodox Do and spirit-binding powers are used to stop fights, not win them.

THE SHI-REN

The Benevolent Aristocrats descend from the Hundred Schools period of Chinese history. Akashayana missionaries converted the first members of this sect, yoking the ruthless pragmatism of Legalist thought to ethical duty and mystical experience. Shi-Ren doctrine held that all beings act out of fear or desire. A wise Shi-Ren uses this web of motivations to put humans, gods and the forces of nature at her command.

Tradition is very important to these Chi'n Ta. By keeping to a traditional cosmology, the Shi-Ren can easily determine the ties that bind being to being and manipulate them with ancient rites. It is to their profound embarrassment that many of their number have abandoned tradition and used Legalist beliefs in the service of the Five Metal Dragons.

JEWELS IN THE VOID: AKASHIC MAGIC

The Akashayana were one of the vital contributors to the Metaphysic of Magic as understood by the Traditions. Inspired by Buddhist philosophers, they posited a subjective view of reality (Samsara) while the Order of Hermes still insisted that Platonic forms and the four Greek elements were the inherent forces of the universe. Akashics rarely took part in debates about the underlying nature of reality, Paradox or any such thing, which lead some observers to think that the Brotherhood was thoroughly cowed by its Western colleagues. However, the fact remains that they are one of the chief architects, along with the Order of Hermes, of an attempted "universal" theory of magic. Furthermore, the Akashayana are famous for their faith in the truth of Ascension. If that doesn't garner respect, their legendary aptitude for violence causes even the cockiest Virtual Adept to think twice about questioning a Brotherhood policy.

According to the Akashayana, Samsara exists because sentient beings cling to unbalanced, materialistic lives. Their desire to grasp the turning of the Wheel fixes it in place, trapping the Bodhicitta (enlightened self) in a web of habitual need and suffering. Fortunately, by training the mind to reject identity and greed, disciplining the body and living in harmony with nature, the superior Brother understands that he is a transient aspect of the Cycle itself and soon learns to act with the force of the entire Tapestry behind him.

Mind is the specialty Sphere of the Sangha for the simple reason that sentient beings' thoughts generate karma, which, when imprinted on the Akasha, guides Yin, Yang and Heaven to create Samsara. However, most people have undisciplined thoughts and desires, so these forces respond by manifesting in a twisted and exaggerated fashion. Thus, the world of illusion and suffering perpetuates itself.

SIMPLE TOOLS: FOCI

The best known focus of the Akashayana is Do. The Way can be used for a variety of things, from steel-rending punches to symbolic Kajas that repel shen. An act can be said to involve Do if it engages the mind, body, and spirit as one tool. Prearranged motions do more than perfect a movement through repetition — they describe a mandala with each gesture. Some actions are designed to enhance body awareness and direct concentration, allowing the Tao Shih to gather Chi, sense minds or even visit the spirit realms.

Other foci are used as expressions of Do or as symbols for the self's ties to the cosmos. Akashic tools are used to encourage discipline and turn the mind away from petty thoughts. With the correct tools and exercises, a Brother clears his mind and touches the infinite.

Sample foci include:

Weapons: The Vajrapani favor swords and sometimes spears (called "the king of weapons" in ancient China). Kan-nagara often use weapons that are so complex that few could practically use them in combat. Nine bladed tridents and flexible swords require precision to use, honing the Brother's mind and spirit for any number of purposes.

Mudras: The Akashayana use these sacred hand and finger positions to invoke a variety of Effects. These also act as a sign language whose words and phrases are patterned after the mystical significance of each gesture.

Sound: Portions of Akashic sutras and mantras are often used to access Akashakarma and other Mind Effects. Focussed chanting, drumming and clapping rouses spirits and purifies the mind. The vibration of certain syllables and notes are also said to have a destructive effect on the human body.

Mandalas: A mandala is a diagram of the mystical structure of the Tapestry. It can be created with silk, sand, a garden or even an entire temple. Do is sometimes described as a mandala of movement. Spirit travel and the manipulation of joss often involves making or studying a mandala.

Calligraphy: Kaja characters are used by the Brotherhood to call spirits, ghosts and gods. Writing can impress thoughts and feelings onto objects. A poem or scripture can be imbued with special powers. The Akashic Record is an example of this principle in action. Written prayers can ward off or injure an inauspicious visitor if thrown or read.

Bodywork: Massage, acupuncture, moxabustion and energy-balancing therapies all serve as useful conduits for healing. On the other hand, knowledge of the body's weaknesses reveals where to do the most damage. It is rumored that the Shi-Ren have perfected acupuncture-based mind control techniques.

THE ARTS OF HARMONY

The following rotes offer brief examples of the Akashayana's magic in action.

Eight Drunken Hsien

(••• Mind or •• Entropy, •• Life)

A popular Do rote among the Li-Hai and Vajrapani, **Eight Drunken Hsien** allows a Tao-Shih to defend against multiple opponents while making it look like an accident! Taking the posture of a staggering drunk, every stumble and wave of the hand wards off an enemy without looking like the Brother is even trying to fight them. Even if the "drunk" Akashic puts up her fists, it will be a lolling head or shrugging shoulder that knocks down a foe. This makes the **Eight Drunken Hsien** technique hard to defend against. Akashics

who have mastered this rote often carry a bottle of Chi-laced wine to enhance their fighting abilities and torment their liver with one swift swig.

Some martial artists practice a rigorous form of Drunken Fighting, but with magical influence, the combatant can insure that his strikes and blocks are totally random, yet totally coincidentally effective.

System: Mind ••• simply makes the Brother's movements look accidental, as enemies seem to trip over her. The Entropy/Life variant randomizes her movements but still directs them to the target. Each extra success on the latter version both lowers the Brother's difficulty to hit and increases the opponents difficulty to dodge, distributed as the player wishes. The rote can provide a minimum difficulty of 3 to strike and a maximum difficulty of 9 to an enemy's dodge. Either version works against one person at two successes, with another success required for each additional attacker. This rote is rarely coincidental against an army of

opponents — it's hard to "accidentally" beat up 20 people in a 15 minute slugfest, regardless of what you might have seen in *Drunken Master* 2.

Gatha

(•• Mind, •• Prime)

This rote allows Akashic poets to weave emotion into every character of their work. Often used as a teaching tool or a master's final testament, a truly enlightened gatha is said to trigger a burst of understanding in those who read it. More frivolous are the use of gatha to emotionally unbalance an enemy. The Li-Hai are said to practice a version of this using spray-painted graffiti, but the rumor has yet to be confirmed.

System: Mind creates the impression, while Prime fuels the emotional energy over time. A gatha typically lasts as long as the Storyteller feels it should, although gatha meant to emotionally unbalance an enemy typically work on one person at two successes, and one more for each success thereafter.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS

All of the Chi'n Ta described in this chapter use the Five Element system. This theory postulates that Yin and Yang combine to create a cycle of five basic forces or properties that manifest throughout nature, both in the literal elements themselves and in human health, colors, tastes and other phenomena. The presence of one elemental state strengthens one element in the cycle and diminishes another. For example, if an acupuncturist wants to stimulate the heart of a patient (ruled by Fire), she inserts a needle into a Wood-ruled area of the body such as the gallbladder meridian.

In Hindu and Buddhist metaphysics, the idea of the elements is closer to the Greek model but still uses a set of correspondences similar to those above. In this system, the elements consist of Earth, Water, Fire, Air and the Void. Miyamoto Musashi's treatise on swordsmanship, the *Book of Five Rings*, used this model to discuss different aspects of the martial arts. Asian mystics freely mixed this model with the Chinese model, providing a plethora of interpretations.

A person can be said to be of a certain elemental type or have a preponderance of those elemental energies, as

can a place, a battle, a work of art or a type of food. In the human body, meridians (channels along which life-giving Chi travel) regulate the elemental energies. An imbalance affects the body when too much of one element strengthens one partner while it impairs another. The heart problem above might be caused by an overactive Water-ruled meridian or organ, such as the bladder. Similarly, a major event, such as a natural disaster, riot, or famine can create imbalance the land; in this case, the dragon lines themselves Resonate with the elemental imprint of events, causing magic to go astray as the bent Tapestry channels mystic energies in strange directions.

This phenomenon means that imbalances can rapidly careen out of control if left untreated. Chi'n Ta who apply this thinking to the Great Cycle are troubled by the implications; if Heaven's own "physicians," such as the Wan Xian, have deserted their duties, who corrects the Cycle's excesses? Although they still use elemental magic, medicine and alchemy, modern sorcerers pay closer attention to the effects of their actions than ever before. The world literally hangs in the balance.

Element	Strengthens	Diminishes	Spiritual Properties	Meridian and Organ
Fire	Earth	Metal	Bravery, Manners, Joy, the Mind	Heart, Small Intestine
Earth	Metal	Water	Contemplation, Wisdom, Pensiveness	Spleen, Stomach
Metal	Water	Wood	Justice, Calm, Grief, the P'o soul	Lungs, Large Intestine
Water	Wood	Fire	Faith, Will, Fear	Kidneys, Bladder
Wood	Fire	Earth	Appetites, Sympathy, Anger, the Hun soul	Liver, Gall Bladder

WU LUNG



The Wu Lung stand on the verge of a rebirth. Confined by the machinations of the Five Metal Dragons and the despised Wu-Keng, China's magical empire has allied with the Akashic Brotherhood. The Dragon Wizards have learned to accommodate their former enemies and now plan the uses to which their new "allies" will be put. But even as the Wu Lung intrigue with the Akashics, the Warring Fist's beliefs and the realities of modern life are dragging the former Craft kicking and screaming into the reforms that may allow it to survive the 21st Century.

Inheritors of a 4,000-year-old magical Tradition, the Wu Lung have battled peasants and monks alike for control of China's heart and soul. For the most part, they have been successful, advising and even becoming emperors at critical moments in the Middle Kingdom's history. However, colonialism, revolution and the schemes of their enemies have driven them to the places like Hong Kong, Macau and Shanghai, where foreign influence mocks the very order of Heaven.

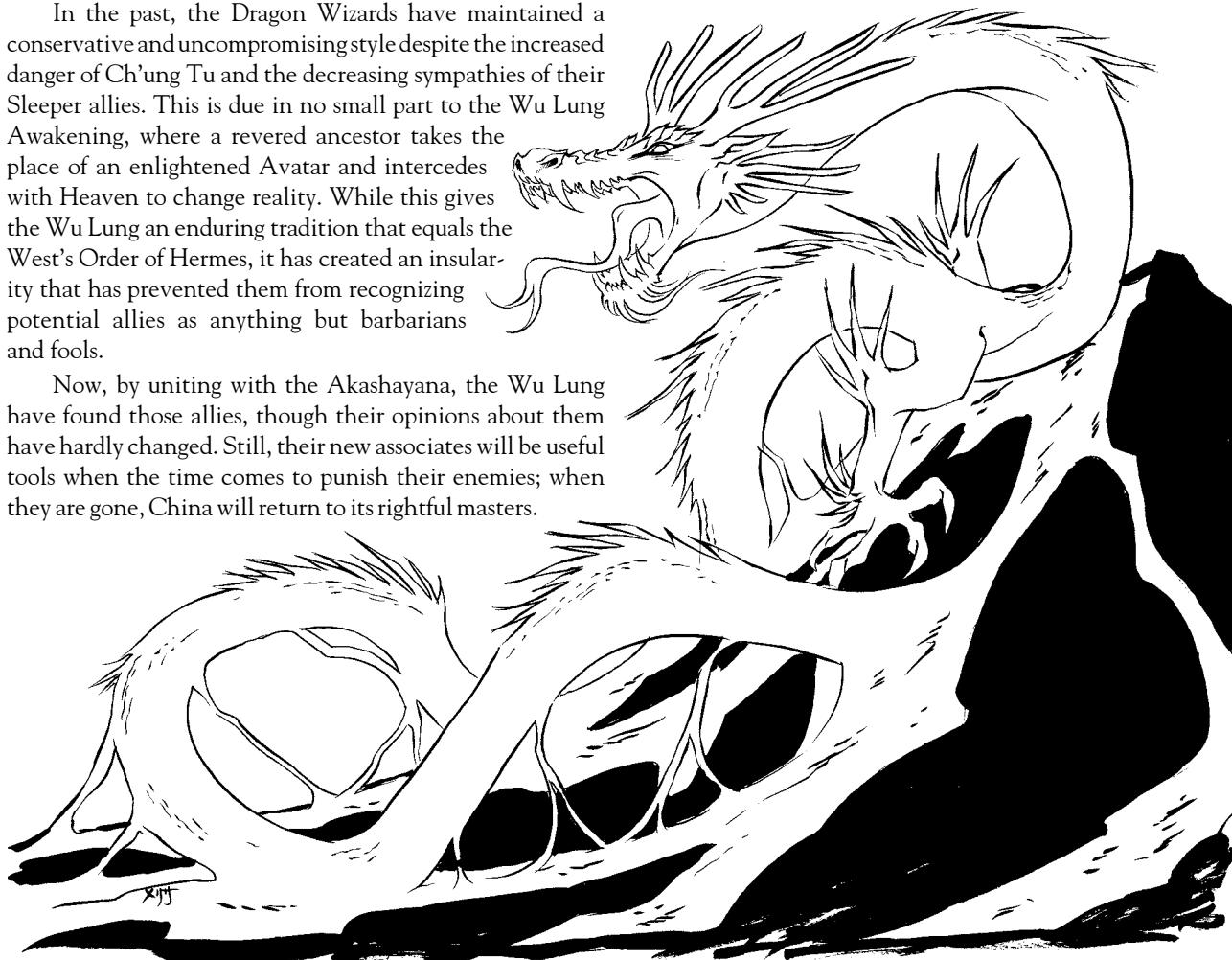
In the past, the Dragon Wizards have maintained a conservative and uncompromising style despite the increased danger of Ch'ung Tu and the decreasing sympathies of their Sleeper allies. This is due in no small part to the Wu Lung Awakening, where a revered ancestor takes the place of an enlightened Avatar and intercedes with Heaven to change reality. While this gives the Wu Lung an enduring tradition that equals the West's Order of Hermes, it has created an insularity that has prevented them from recognizing potential allies as anything but barbarians and fools.

Now, by uniting with the Akashayana, the Wu Lung have found those allies, though their opinions about them have hardly changed. Still, their new associates will be useful tools when the time comes to punish their enemies; when they are gone, China will return to its rightful masters.

HISTORY

The Wu Lung lay claim to a venerable parentage. They say that the very first Wu Lung was the Yellow Emperor himself; the Five Emperors dynasty supposedly laid the foundations for Wu Lung magic by codifying the secrets of primal sorcerers such as Fu Hsi, Na Kua, and Sui-jen, and putting their practices in accord with the Celestial Bureaucracy. Therefore, the Wu Lung lay claim to the invention of written language, silk and agriculture.

During the Shang and Chou dynasties, China underwent rapid technological progress and social change. While peasant sorcerers concerned themselves with making the crops come in on time (and protecting their people from the extensive slavery in both periods), the Wu Lung served as astrologers, inventors and strategists for the nobility. Despite the best efforts of the Dragon Wizards to keep both kingdoms intact, each collapsed in peasant revolts, leading to the Warring States period. The Wu Lung also experimented with technology, creating flying thrones (kept aloft by rockets — very



DRAGONS AND DRAGON EMPERORS

Dragons play a special role in the Middle Kingdom, particularly for the Wu Lung. Asian dragons have never been “monsters” or wholly of this world. While many of their European counterparts were little more than impressive animals, Eastern dragons have always been intelligent and endowed with supernatural powers.

The greater dragons exist in almost every major natural feature. Feng shui can pick out the outlines of dragons in the hills and mountains. The mammoth bones of dragons can still be seen underneath ancient sediment (the Technocracy’s contention that they are dinosaur bones alternately amuse and anger both the Chi’n Ta and Zhong Lung). The Dragon King of the Sea’s lieutenants flow along the jagged waves, and Chiang Lung (river dragons) snake along the course of rivers everywhere. Metal and fire dragons are rarely seen since few observers survive an encounter with one roused enough to be recognized.

A dragon does more than dwell in a particular place; he is that place. A dragon line is rightly named, for a shen who travels it is treading along the Chi that flows through the dragon’s spiritual body. Similarly, when a dragon line is moved with geomancy, it can sicken and injure the dragon it is attached to as Chi twists through its body at unhealthy angles. A sick dragon leads to bad joss for everyone in the area, although a clever feng shui can direct it at a particular target.

These dragons have used their link to the Tapestry for good and ill. When the August Personage of Jade decreed that a drought should engulf China, the dragons took pity on the people and brought them rain in defiance of Heaven’s command. The August Personage punished them by pinning them under four great mountains, but the dragons escaped by turning into rivers, again aiding the thirsty mortals and their crops. However, the Black Dragon River also attempted to flood China until he was stopped by Na Kua.

While most dragons spend most of their time melded with nature, younger and smaller dragons sometimes reveal

dangerous!) and devices decorated in a dragon motif that could detect — or cause — earthquakes.

Paradoxically, the turmoil produced three of China’s great thinkers: Confucius, Lao-tzu, and Sun-tzu. With its seemingly bizarre and antisocial tenets, early Taoism didn’t interest the Dragon Wizards; Confucius and Sun-tzu set the pattern for their early endeavors. Individual Wu Lung acted as “mercenary scholars,” advisors who trained ambitious warlords to win battles and rule the state. The Wu Lung became extremely fractious at this point; each attempted to have his candidate crush the others. However, all Wu Lung discouraged peasant

themselves in their classical serpentine forms. In some parts of China, Chiang Lung still scare away boaters who don’t give the dragon his due.

According to the Wu Lung, nine dragons were given human form during the Third Age. Called the Zhong Lung, they were charged with transmitting the secrets of Heaven to human beings. With memories that stretched into the First Age itself, they were privy to the deepest secrets of Heaven and earth. Middle Dragons shared this wisdom with the worthy, so that the would learn their place in the Celestial order.

When humanity turned away from the August Personage of Jade, the Zhong Lung were assigned the sad duty of punishing those unworthy to bear Heaven’s secrets. Only the ancestors of the Wu Lung were spared by the Middle Dragons; these Wu inherited the Mandate of Heaven from them, becoming the legitimate rulers and judges of humanity. Of the family of the Middle Dragons, these early sages paved the way for the Yellow Emperor to spread medicine, agriculture and other wonders throughout the Middle Kingdom.

Whatever truth the legend holds, it is well known that Fu Xia styled himself “T’ien Lung,” the representative of the Dragon in the Middle Kingdom. During the Han and Tang Dynasties, Dragon Emperor Fu Xia ruled China, either indirectly or disguised as a mortal. Perhaps he was more than he appeared; certainly, no Wu Lung has ever exceeded his magical or temporal power. His retirement and disappearance, just before the strengthening of the Wall and the rise of Chung T’u, makes a few Wu Lung wonder if there is a dragon looking over their shoulders.

Those who share blood ties with Fu Xia are particularly blessed, for Heaven grants them the right to use the Zhong Lung’s blessings without risking Ch’ung Tu. In game terms, this is the *Shapechanger Kin Merit (Mage Revised, p. 296)*.

magic, such as that practised by the shamans who helped to overthrow the early dynasties.

Sometime during this period, Akashic missionaries managed to win over many of the early Dragon Wizards by combining Legalism with ethics and mysticism. These Shi-Ren were popular with their subjects but hated by the Wu Lung, who wished the nobility to remain aggressive enough for someone to seize control of China (preferably with a Dragon Wizard by their side). To this day, the Wu Lung despise the Akashic Brotherhood’s lack of ambition where temporal power is concerned.

Finally, a Wu Lung called Fu Xia managed to unite others behind Cheng, a bloodthirsty boy-king with boundless ambition. With their support, Cheng united China and crowned himself Qin Shihuang.

With Wu Lung encouragement, the self-styled "Second Yellow Emperor" destroyed most of the scholarly efforts of previous ages. Now that the Wu Lung had their candidate, they didn't want to share the techniques they had used to bring him to power.

As Qin Shihuang aged, he realized that his dynasty would not survive him and looked to the Wu Lung to provide him with an eternal reign. After using his ambition as a reason to torment the Wu-Keng, the Wu Lung enthroned him as the Emperor of the Yellow Springs, ruler of the Underworld. Fu Xia became the First Emperor of the Wu Lung. The Han dynasty, which the Wu Lung had intentionally truncated the Qin dynasty to accommodate, served as Fu Xia's mouthpiece for over 400 years. The rise of educated officials under Han rule allowed the Wu Lung to completely dominate Chinese society. This also allowed the Wu Lung to contact Western magi; unfortunately, the majority of these either came from primitive feudal societies or practiced a form of magic that was totally unintelligible to the Dragon Wizards.

Only the Order of Reason, with its parallel technologies and a like-minded desire to perfect the state, held any appeal for the Wu Lung. Driven to desperation by Mongol rule, a delegation of Legalist scholars and inventors journeyed with the Dalou'laoshi to the Convention of the Ivory Tower in 1325.

The Traditions also attempted to bring the Wu Lung into the fold but made a diplomatic blunder by first inviting their rivals, the Akashic Brotherhood. With the rise of Buddhism, Akashic monks and warrior families established a power base centered around Buddhist monasteries and even managed to topple Wu Lung candidates for the throne. However, even though the Wu Lung were forced to accept the Buddhist, peasant-founded Ming dynasty, they were able to retaliate by surrounding the emperor with corrupt officials. This weakened Ming rule while the Manchurians were groomed to take its place. When the Manchurian Qing dynasty seized power, the Tiger Lord used it as a tool to eliminate remaining Akashayana resistance.

Unfortunately, preoccupation with the Middle Kingdom allowed the Technocracy to gain strength before the Wu Lung could react. By 1900, the Five Metal Dragons had paved the way for the Western Technocracy to subvert Heaven's law itself. When the colonial powers invaded, Wu Lung counterspells couldn't stop the rifles of the West. Humiliating concessions to the Europeans such as Hong Kong and Macau undermined the authority of the Emperor himself; in the revolutions that followed, the Dragon Wizards were helpless witnesses to the destruction of their paradigm. Manchuria, where the Dragon Wizards had moved their most venerable sorcerers, was abused by Japanese rule, and

the mortal emperor turned into a figurehead and a parody for their conquerors' convenience.

Ironically, the Wu Lung were now forced to turn to the nations that had undermined their rule to gain strength. Chinese communities abroad became a safe haven from the Cultural Revolution when it destroyed Wu Lung institutions.

In these smaller communities, the Dragon Wizards learned to be tolerant. Forced to share space with the Akashic Brotherhood in Western Chinatowns and cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, the Dragon Wizards cooperated with the Brotherhood on a number of joint ventures against the Technocracy and for their communities. Finally, in 2000, the Wu Lung and Akashayana agreed to an alliance to defeat the Technocracy and preserve their remaining strongholds in China and Tibet. The new alliance has been cemented by the decision to arrange marriages between family oriented Akashics such as the Vajrapani and Dragon Wizards in the service of the Thousand-Tiger Lord. While both sides are loathe to admit it, a future generation may be initiated into a single, combined Tradition.

PHILOSOPHY

The Wu Lung speak to Heaven for humanity. Although anyone can ask their ancestors to bring the favor of the Celestial Bureaucracy, only the Dragon Wizards have attained enough merit in Heaven's eyes to expect an answer from the gods. Every petition has a correct form and intent; if the standards were relaxed, then every urge would be served by the gods and the world would turn upside down! The Dragon Emperor Wizard, Phoenix Empress Wizard and Tiger Lord General serve as the chief ministers of this balance, each mastering a particular aspect of the Great Cycle and dispensing its properties with justice and pragmatism.

The Magical Bureaucracy occupies a special position in China's metaphysical hierarchy. As human beings, they are suspended between Heaven and earth, but as sorcerers, they are officials of the Celestial Bureaucracy, giving them the right and duty to truck with the ancestors and gods themselves. The Wu Lung consider themselves to be shih, living sages equivalent in rank to the deified scholars that were traditionally selected from the ranks of virtuous mortals to become city gods. Like a shih god, a Dragon Wizard's Hun has transformed into shen, or spirit. His Heavenly nature allows him to communicate directly with a true shih, his ancestor. A Wu Lung's shih Avatar guides her along the path of Li, or righteousness. A superior Wu Lung hones his political and spiritual might until he is subsumed into the T'ai Chi, the Absolute that the Traditions call Ascension. Li possesses the limitless power of the T'ai Chi, but it is naturally constrained by Chi, the energy that creates worldly phenomena.

A Dragon Wizard's ultimate goal is to refine the crude Chi into Li through the practice of Ching, or reverence. Scholarship, alchemy, martial arts and dispensing justice

LEXICON

Ching: Respect, reverence. Required to gain Li.

Ch'uang Shih: A senior student.

Chu Jen: A Master of the Spirit Arts and at least one other field.

Ch'ung Tu: Paradox.

Feng Huan Hou Wu: Phoenix Empress Wizard. One of the three rulers of the Wu Lung, who reincarnates into her own child every 108 years. As of 2000, inhabiting an eight year old body.

Hu Kuei Tsu: Tiger Lord Wizard, the General of the Magical Bureaucracy. As of 2000, regent over the Wu Lung.

Hun: The part of the soul that is attracted to Li. A virtuous person's Hun becomes a shen after death.

Kuei: An evil ghost or spirit.

Kuei Lung Chuan: Spirit Dragon Fist, the martial art of the Tiger School.

Kuei Tsu: The nine rulers of the Magical Bureaucracy. Each oversees one office. Headed by the Tiger Lord.

Kun Lun: The Horizon Realm of the Wu Lung, lost due to the Avatar Storm.

Li: Righteousness, reciprocity. Often compared to the term Arete by Western magi.

Magical Bureaucracy: the Wu Lung as a whole, referring to their imitation of the Celestial Bureaucracy.

Nan Wu: A full member of the Wu Lung who has graduated from the Sheng Shou and Ch'uang Shih ranks.

Office: A department of the Magical Bureaucracy, ruled by a Kuei Tsu.

P'o: The materialistic, destructive half of the soul. The P'o of an evil person either becomes a Kuei or is cursed to walk the earth as a Wan Kuei.

Pu Chang: Ministers who examine candidates for Chu Jen rank.

Shen: A divine spirit.

Sheng Shou: Junior apprentices

Shih: A deified ancestor. Used to refer to the Wu Lung's Avatar.

Sifu: A Wu Lung of Chu Jen or higher when addressed by his apprentices.

Sigung: An Archmage.

Sihing: A senior tutor, usually of Nan Wu rank.

T'ai Chi: The Absolute, the Great Ultimate. Ascension, or the world as it was in the First Age.

Three Ministers: Tiger, Phoenix, and Dragon. The servants of the August Personage of Jade who sets the Wheel of Ages in motion.

T'ien Kung te Huang Ti Wu Lung: Heavenly Emperor of the Dragon Wizards, the ruler of the Wu Lung. As of 2000, contact between the Dragon Emperor and Earth's Wu Lung has been severed.

are all acts that promote Ching by linking the Wu Lung with tradition and using it to improve herself and the world. Rigorous examinations determine what practices help a Nan Wu increase in power and wisdom.

ORGANIZATION: THE MAGICAL BUREAUCRACY

To the Wu Lung, the study and practice of magic should mirror Heaven itself. Therefore, the Magical Bureaucracy organizes itself on Confucian and Legalist models that supposedly parallel the Heavenly Kingdom of Jade.

The **T'ien Kung te Huang Ti Wu Lung**, "Heavenly Emperor of the Dragon Wizards," is the ruler of the Magical Bureaucracy. It is his duty to perform the rituals that appease the August Personage of Jade and to act as his judge on earth, just as the Dragon acts as the judge of Heaven. If he is still alive, the former Dragon Emperor is now well over a thousand years old. He is referred to only by his title. As the true Dragon Emperor is lost in the Umbra, the serene Bai Beishi has temporarily stepped into his role.

The Feng Huan Huo Wu, "Phoenix Empress-Wizard," also has no name other than her title. She represents the Phoenix, who acts as Heaven's messenger, tempering the Dragon Emperor's justice with mercy. The Phoenix Empress has reincarnated as her own daughter over 300 times; her mastery of nature's cycles is reflected in the prowess of the Phoenix School. The lost Phoenix Empress is currently in an eight-year-old body; her interim replacement is Xi Zhuanji, a skilled life sorceress and shapeshifter.

The Hu Kuei Tsu Wu, "Tiger Lord Wizard," is the Magical Bureaucracy's general and lord of the Office of War. The current Tiger Lord, Choujingha Yuguo, is the designated heir to the Dragon Emperor. Despite the loss of Kun Lun, Choujingha Yuguo refuses to claim the title of Emperor, although he does hold a loose regency over the Wu Lung.

The Tiger Lord is the head of the Kuei Tsu, nine lords who oversee the affairs of the Magical Bureaucracy. The other eight Kuei Tsu oversee Education, Tradition, Treasure, Law, Records, Provisions, Intelligence and Religion. A Kuei Tsu may use his sorcerers and their possessions however he sees fit to fulfil the responsibilities of his office. Currently, six of the Dragon School and two of the Tiger School (apart from T'ien Meng) hold positions in the Kuei Tsu.

The nine Pu Chang are each specialists in a single field of magic and assess lesser Wu Lung for promotion to the ranks of the Chu Jen. Currently, the Phoenix wizard Moonflower is the only representative of her school among the Ministers of Magic; the rest are split between the Tiger and Dragon Schools.

Chu Jen are masters who control all of the Wu Lung in a city and strictly regulate contact with the spirits there. Because of their duties, all of them must master Spirit magic

as well as their specialty. Chu Jen are also charged with the training of the Sheng Shou.

Chu Jen are sometimes called Sifu, but this is an honorific that can be used to describe any teacher who has mastered the magical arts. Lesser tutors are called Sihing ("Older Brother"). Above the Bureaucracy's ranks, Sigung ("Grandfathers") wander the Tapestry, Archmages who avoid the politics of the Wu Lung to concentrate on mastering the most sublime magic. While the Pu Chang and their superiors are of comparable power, it is said the Sigung are divine teachers, peerless in their wisdom. Sadly, most seem to have disappeared from earth.

Nan Wu are full-fledged Wu Lung who take care of day-to-day business of the nine ministries. Each is assigned to a Kuei Tsu and progresses through nine ranks within that office. Usually, members of any school can belong to any office. Some, such as the Office of War, strongly prefer students from their own school.

Ch'uang Shih are senior students, roughly equivalent to a Hermetic Disciple in power (and thus, the starting rank for most player characters). While each is assigned a Sifu, they have earned the responsibility of directing their own studies and may freely learn from any loyal and competent Wu Lung. The Ch'uang Shih are also divided into nine offices and nine ranks, and belong to the same office as their Sifu. To join the ranks of the Nan Wu, they must pass a Magical Service Exam that tests their ability to serve the office that they are applying for. While most Ch'uang Shih enter the same office as their Sifu, it is not unheard of for a brave Wu Lung to choose a different path than his master. A Wu Lung encounters more tedious exams every time she applies for a rise in rank, until she becomes a Chu Jen, after which positions are granted by appointment and secured with intrigue.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Sheng Shou, junior students who lead disciplined lives filled with constant study and service. Each belongs to a "chair" of the same office as their Sifu, since they are not considered competent enough to officially belong to that office. After a few years of unquestioning obedience and diligent practice, a Sheng Shou is tested by his Sifu to see whether he is worthy enough to join the ranks of the Ch'uang Shih.

While each office requires certain magical talents, the Wu-Lung study magic according to the division that is set out by their leaders and by Heaven itself. The Magical Service Exams taken to reach Nan Wu rank direct each Dragon Wizard to a particular school. These are both philosophical and political bodies; while each acknowledges that it is only a part of the whole, most Wu Lung use their offices to promote the interests of their school.

THE DRAGON SCHOOL: HEAVEN'S JUDGES

Men who excel at the Magical Service Exams are invited into the Wu Lung leadership. They act as liaisons between the Celestial Bureaucracy and the Middle Kingdom. From

the lowliest Sheng Shou who tends to a local earth god, to the Dragon Emperor himself, who makes offerings to the August Personage of Jade, each forges a close tie to the spirit worlds. Prowess in the Spirit Arts is honed by learning the portfolios of Heaven's divine ministers. A budding Dragon Wizard simply propitiates these powers for the sake of his betters; superior Wu Lung advise the gods and divine ancestors themselves. In this manner, the Wu Lung gain their powers from the Celestial offices.

The Dragon School also administers justice to rest of the Magical Bureaucracy. Just as Lung (Dragon) acts as Heaven's destroyer, so the Dragon School believes that it is their role to purge what is corrupted from their order and from the mystical landscape of the Middle Kingdom. The Legalists of the Wu Lung naturally gravitate to this role; they know that the Wheel of Ages needs the whip of punishment to make it turn.

It is to the Dragon School's eternal shame that so many of their members left the Wu Lung for the Five Metal Dragons. Today, the most conservative Wu Lung make up the body of the Dragon's School and plot their revenge in earnest.

THE TIGER SCHOOL: DIVINE GENERALS

The Tigers are practical sorcerers, more given to application than magical scholarship. This does not mean that they lack wisdom; rather, they concern themselves with action. The Tiger School teaches its students how to find the Tao in righteous activity. Etiquette, strategy and swordsmanship are studied to practice Ching in service to the Magical Bureaucracy as a whole. Unlike the Akashayana, the Tigers don't learn physical skills to perfect the self; instead, fighting ability generates the bravery necessary to serve the Wu Lung. Their skill with the destructive power of the Five Elements is well known.

The intellectual heirs of Master Sun, the Tigers are willing to perform acts that many would find brutal or immoral, but not without reason. Indeed, the current Tiger Lord was famous for his arguments with the Emperor. While the Tiger School commits itself wholeheartedly to the Wu Lung, it is unwilling to support inefficient or foolish plans.

It is said that the Tiger Lord supported the women's Phoenix School from its inception. Recently, the Tigers have allowed women into their ranks as well. The first renewed contacts between the Akashayana and the Wu Lung were through the efforts of Tiger warriors who put more importance in a practical alliance than a philosophical divide. How long the Dragon School will tolerate these eccentricities is unknown, but they are currently in no position to object.

THE PHOENIX SCHOOL: MERCIFUL SORCERY

Until the 1800s, there was only one female Wu Lung: the Phoenix Empress. The Dragon Emperor's consort is as immortal as her husband but reincarnates in the body of her

own child every 108 years. In the early 17th Century, she shared her insights into the secrets of Life magic with a small group of female students; today, these Phoenixes occupy positions at every level of the Magical Bureaucracy.

The Phoenix School rewards where the Dragons judge. Members are skilled in healing magic and use this talent to help both Sleepers and Wu Lung. These Chi'n Ta also manipulate fate by appealing to the Stove and Earth Gods that report mortals' affairs to the Celestial Bureaucracy. While many Wu Lung disdain lesser gods, the Phoenixes prefer subtle magic to the powers that come from the greatest gods of the Heavenly Court.

MAGIC

Li guides the Dragon Wizards' magic. Every magical working begins by honoring the ancestors, particularly the Wu Lung's ancestral shih. The shih is a Wu Lung's link to Heaven and ultimately decides the propriety of any magical undertaking. After appeasing the shih, a Wu Lung often petitions the god whose portfolio contains the power that the Dragon Wizard wishes to utilize. This can be as simple as a quick promise to a city god when the Chi'n Ta wants to create a door to escape through or as elaborate as a huge meal, money, and gifts given to persuade a Minister of Heaven to favor him with thunderbolts, flight or the secrets of life and death.

Wu Lung often pay special devotion to a particular god as part of every ritual. For example, members of the Tiger School often venerate Kwan Yu, the scholar general, while Phoenixes devote themselves to Kwan Yin, the goddess of healing. Even the Yama Queen Tou Mu is accorded a certain respect; it is said the horrors that she fosters serve as a test of Li.

Wu Lung magic also uses China's traditional metaphysics. Before they were degraded to the status of "pseudo-science" by Technocratic fiat, the Wu Lung used these beliefs to describe physical and spiritual phenomena with scientific rigor.

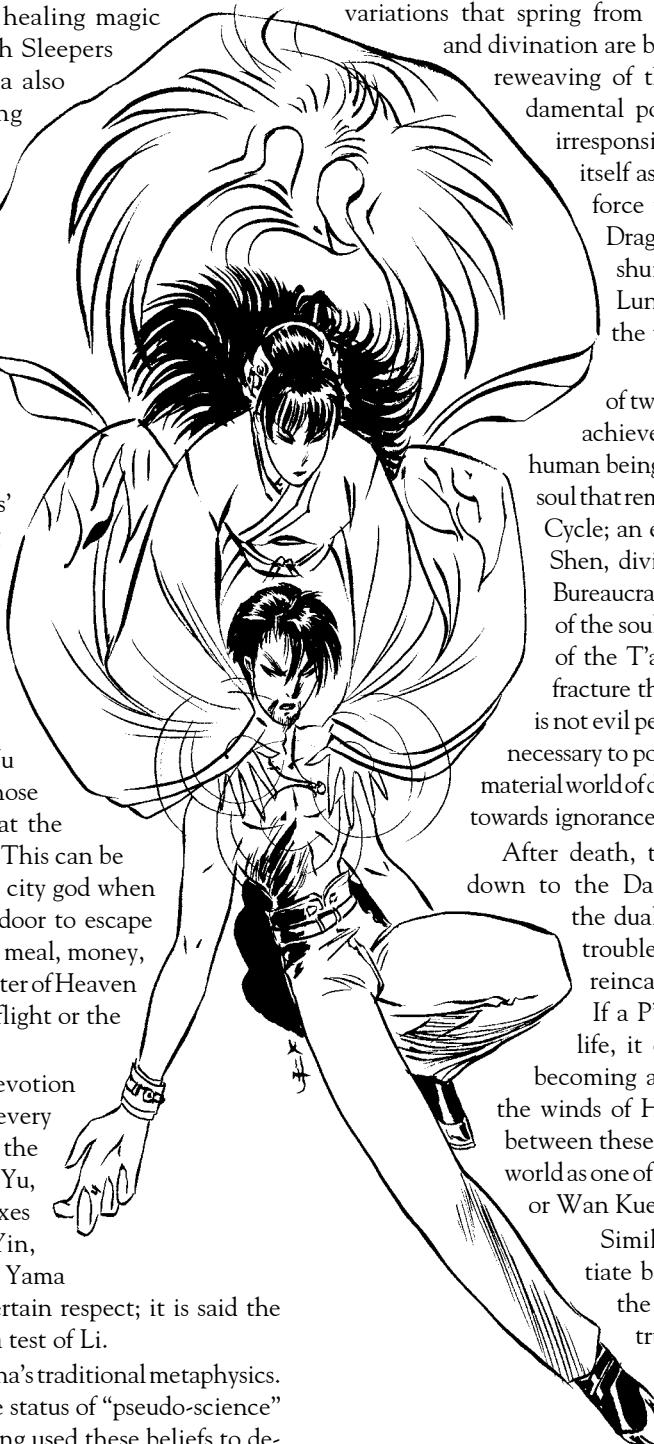
The T'ai Chi was truly perfect in the First Age. As the world evolved, it divided and recombined. After the Three Ministers sprung from the primal Yin and Yang, they set the universe into motion. Permutations in the Great Cycle gave rise to the Five Elements, the eight trigrams and the infinite variations that spring from their interaction. Writing and divination are both signs of the continuous reweaving of the Tapestry by these fundamental powers. As crude matter or irresponsible thoughts, Li manifests itself as Chi, a rough metaphysical force that must be tamed by the Dragon Wizard. Alchemy, feng shui, and exercise attune the Wu Lung to imbalances and provide the tools to correct them.

Similarly, the soul consists of two opposites that nonetheless achieve a balance in the average human being. The Hun is the part of the soul that remembers its place in the Great Cycle; an enlightened Hun becomes a Shen, divine servant of the Celestial Bureaucracy. The P'o spirit is the part of the soul that relishes in the division of the T'ai Chi, and seeks to further fracture the Ten Thousand Things. It is not evil per se — in fact, it is absolutely necessary to possess a P'o to understand the material world of discrete opposites — but tends towards ignorance and self-destructive acts.

After death, the P'o can drag the Hun down to the Dark Kingdom of Jade, and the dual souls become a Kuei — a troublesome ghost that must await reincarnation in the Underworld.

If a P'o gained enough power in life, it consumes the Hun whole, becoming a screaming spirit adrift on the winds of Hell. A very few are caught between these extremes and return to the world as one of the noxious Demon People, or Wan Kuei.

Similarly, the Wu Lung differentiate between fallen shen such as the hengeyokai and hsien, and true shen, who have the ear of the August Personage. The Dragon Wizard's ancestral Avatar, the shih, is of course one of the latter.



SEALS OF THE GODS: FOCI

A Wu Lung's magic ultimately comes from Li, a discipline so strong that Heaven itself bows to the Dragon Wizard's noble example. Few Wu Lung appeal to an ancestor or god without their ritual tools or gifts. These Chi'n Ta can improvise; many prepare charms ahead of time or carry an assortment of coins, grains and papers in case of emergency. Gunpowder, lead oxide and mercury are the more exotic tools kept on hand by alchemists and others who use Chinese metaphysics to command the cycles of creation itself. These foci include:

Kuei Lung Chuan: This martial art serves as a focus for some of the Tiger School's more spectacular magic. The ability to leap a hundred feet into the air or catch an arrow in one's teeth comes from hard training and virtuous conduct. Heaven smiles on a such a superior person.

Fu: These are small paper charms, brushed with Chinese characters and pictures, used to invoke forces, affect spirits and alter joss. One paper might invoke the Three Gods of Prosperity; another might trap a troublesome spirit in a geomantic design.

Portraits: When an artist depicts a god, she brings that god into the painting. Similarly, ancestors can make use of their images to contact their families and influence the world. Pictures are often used to represent a god or ancestor at a sacrifice or offering.

Genealogical Tablets: These wooden and stone tablets list the Wu Lung's ancestors as far back as she can determine. Every Wu Lung keeps a set in her Sanctum to use in an important magical working. The tablets demonstrate filial piety and aid concentration.

Food and Drink: Gods and ancestors alike are pleased with the gifts of rice and wine. Of course for the shih deities of the cities, more sumptuous fare must be offered. Usually, the Wu Lung burns or eats the food at the conclusion of the rite. Spirit magic and truly audacious favors typically demand such a meal, but even a brief libation can get results.

Writing: The Chinese language is magical. It has conquered nations and forged a single culture out of thousands of tribes. As the symbol of civilization, Chinese characters represent the will of Heaven and the legacy of the Yellow Emperor. In and of itself, writing is an act of creation recombining meanings like a continuous rain of hexagrams.

The I Ching: No magician of Chinese origin can ignore the *I Ching*, but the Wu Lung use it more than most. Throwing the yarrow stalks or coins is more than divination; it is a powerful tool for self-insight and subtle influence.

Swords: Aside from their obvious uses, a metal blade conducts Yin energies. The Wu Lung prefer the jian, a straight sword used by T'ai Chi practitioners.

Alchemy: The Wu Lung's expertise in this field is matched only by the Solificati of the Order of Hermes. By

invoking the gods that rule over particular concoctions and preparing them according to the Five Elements principle, the Wu Lung can create longevity potions, heal injuries and even control minds with a powder or liquid. A skilled alchemist can also create explosives that affect both the material and spirit realms.

DIVINE COMMANDS: ROTES

Wu Lung magic is a formal affair. Thus, a Dragon Wizard most often uses rituals that have been handed down for hundreds or thousands of years. A Wu Lung can improvise but risks the ire of Heaven's ministers. Words spoken in haste lack respect, and draw Ch'ung Tu, what the West calls Paradox.

Thunder Bridge

(••• Forces, •• Prime; optional •• Matter)

This spectacular enchantment conjures a bolt of lightning for the Wu Lung to use as transportation; she simply grabs a hold of it and is carried aloft, often to a waiting cloud that takes her anywhere she wishes. While the lightning arcs around her, metal weapons are deflected and unarmed foes face electrocution.

System: The Forces and Prime magic creates a pillar of electricity that can carry the Wu Lung in any unobstructed direction. For each success past the threshold, the Wu Lung gains a soak die per success against metal weapons, including bullets. An unarmed combatant takes an equal number of dice of bashing damage if he hits the Dragon Wizard, but still does full damage. **Thunder Bridge** usually has a success threshold of three.

Rouse the Dragon

(•••• Forces or •••• Matter, •••• Prime, •••• Spirit)

Used against barbarian armies and rebels, **Rouse the Dragon** awakens the sleeping dragons that inhabit all natural formations. The Wu Lung prepares hundreds of Fu charms naming the dragon to be awoken and creates a replica of the dragon out of jade, paper or gold. After appeasing his ancestors with a feast and libation, the Wu Lung burns all of the charms and paints red dots upon the replica dragon's eyes, ritually awakening it.

Depending on the dragon in question, a tidal wave, earthquake, volcanic eruption or hurricane can come of the Wu Lung's efforts. Furthermore, the Wu Lung can control exactly how the devastation occurs. For example, he can leave one shack standing in a village ruined by an earthquake. This is because the spirit of the dragon forms the element being disturbed into a rough likeness of its body. A hurtling mountain dragon can use his talons of granite to crush a farm terrace by terrace or surround it in his coils, making escape impossible. The Wu Lung can also permanently alter the natural feature of an area; he can level a mountain, cause a chill wind to pass through an area forever, or create a new river.

System: The Wu Lung summons a powerful spirit and embodies it in a mountain, wind current or the ocean itself, using Forces and Matter. The Effect has a threshold of at least 10 successes; this is sufficient to level a small town or use an Earth Dragon to surround it with an impassable barrier. While the damage is standard, the effect cannot cause enough change to alter trade winds or major geographical features nor can it be used without the consent of the Wu Lung's shih. The utter vulgarity of the Effect is also worth considering! The dragon is also not under control of the Wu Lung unless he uses a different Spirit Effect to bind it — a heroic task in and of itself. This Effect is primarily meant to be a Storyteller device, although if a player has an excellent reason to destroy or landscape a small part of the Middle Kingdom, this caution should hardly hold her back.

Cycle of the Five Agents

(••• Forces 3, •• Matter, •• Prime)

This rote simply uses a Fu to change one element into its partner in the creative or destructive cycle (see *The Five Elements*, p. 51). The Dragon Wizard simply inscribes the name of the element on the Fu, and burns it in the presence of the force being altered. For example, by burning the character for earth in front of a fire, she can convert flame into soil. Alternately, she can smother an element used against her by preparing a Fu that invokes that element's destroyer. Once created, the element can be altered in the order of the creative cycle.

Younger Wu Lung use **Cycle of the Five Agents** to duel among themselves, with each rapidly shifting elements and using Fu charms to counter the other until the victor has suppressed her opponent's flame, mote of metal shards or whatever else was conjured.

System: The rote allows the Wu Lung to put out fires and perform other such elemental transformations. This rote can be used to neutralize an elemental Effect instead of countermagic. Melting metal with flame or absorbing water with earth are two possible ways to counter those Effects. An element may be created to ward off a sorcerous attack, if the Wu Lung knows it's coming. In this case, no matter the element, the rote is treated as a Forces Effect. Typically, the element can be changed once per turn and held in reserve for one turn per extra success.

Summon the Earthly Gods

(•••• Spirit, •••• Mind, •••• Correspondence)

This rote is dreaded by the Kuei-jin and other earthbound shen, for it summons them to an involuntary audience with the Wu Lung. The Chi'n Ta prepares a ritual meal and a scroll detailing the shen's mandate. Heaven responds by compelling the creature to attend in deference to the Dragon Wizard's authority. The shen cannot use her powers against the sorcerer.

System: Spirit and Mind compel a hengeyokai, Kuei-jin, or hsien to attend the sorcerer without harming her. The Wu

Lung must gain two successes plus a number of successes equal to the subject's permanent Willpower to have it travel to the Wu Lung in the quickest available way. For two additional successes, the subject may be pulled through space to appear before the Dragon Wizard in an instant. A smart sorcerer uses this magic to facilitate negotiations; Hengeyokai and Kuei-jin have long memories and crafty minds, so direct orders are fraught with danger.

108 Plum Blossoms

(•• Forces, •• Correspondence)

An Adept of the Tiger School perfects his balance by practicing on the Plum Blossom stumps, a network of pillars that the Wu Lung negotiates while practicing chuan (prearranged routines equivalent to Japanese kata). By performing the Plum Blossom routine beforehand, the Tiger Wizard gains preternatural balance, allowing him to run across slack ropes and perform handstands on a single finger.

System: The Wu Lung doesn't lose his balance on anything but a completely frictionless surface. A strong impact can knock him down, but unless the object or opponent is landing on top of him or otherwise pinning him, he can regain his footing the next turn without sacrificing an action. The character can balance on narrow poles, tightropes, wobbling boards, shoulders or the like without any sort of Dexterity roll — the magic itself assures balance — and moves at full normal speeds over such surfaces. If the character attempts to run, jump, fight or otherwise perform athletic feats, the magic provides a bonus of +1 per success scored (up to +3) on all Dexterity + Athletics rolls to retain balance. Even if knocked down, the character springs to his feet (or hands or whatever position is desired) at the beginning of his next turn and may still take a normal action, for so long as this Effect lasts. Note that some surfaces may prove impossible to balance upon, even with this Effect — a Technocratically smooth plastic or lubricated line, a moving spear head, an ocean wave, or a gaseous or flexible object like a piece of whipping cloth does not provide sufficient purchase and area for anything less than a legendary feat (with, say, ten or more successes).

Repel the Kuei

(•• Mind or •• Spirit)

While this rote is often used to ward off demons and ghosts, it is also effective in driving away mortal undesirables. The Dragon Wizard simply sets off a string of firecrackers, which frightens away mundane nuisances and strengthens the Wall against spiritual evil.

System: The Wu Lung either inspires fear in an earthbound enemy, as the Mind Effect **Empathic Projection** or uses Spirit to perform the opposite of the **Call Spirit** Effect. The sound of the firecrackers does not banish spirits per se but makes the area uncomfortable for them to be around as the realms beyond the Wall are filled with frightening staccato

booming noises. Usually, only bound, highly motivated or powerful spirits remain.

Tsuiho — The Fires of Heaven

(•••• Correspondence)

When the Dragons themselves are maimed by evil, and defiled dragon lines feed corrupt energies to the world, Heaven must answer.

Legend has it that Yi the excellent Archer first used this rote, to purify the land defiled by the false suns of the Dragon River War. After the false suns had been banished, the retreating Five Ghost Emperor and his devil-ridden army supped on Chi from the withered corpses of Chiang Lung to heal their wounds and ready themselves for another assault on the Middle Kingdom.

Yi answered the threat by showing them the true power of the sun.

Today, a desert of black sand at the foot of the Zongshan Mountains marks the grave of Yi Han, the Five Ghost Emperor. No dragon lines cross it, and no spirits dwell there.

As passed down in the *Annals of the Celestial Army*, the ritual requires little skill or subtlety. It does require the Wu Lung using it to be willing to offer up her life (how Yi escaped its consequences has been lost to time) and to be persistent enough to perform the arduous rite to the finish. Quite simply, *Tsuiho* brings the fires of the sun to earth. Blinding light and unimaginable heat leave the unfortunate target utterly annihilated.

In precise Kaja characters, the Dragon Wizard must state the nature of her grievance with the intended target of the spell and argue for the right to bring the sun to earth. Such arguments usually draw on Confucian and Legalistic arguments and run to 100,000 characters long, or more. These are either written on handmade paper, inscribed in bones or carved into the flesh of an apprentice. The Wu Lung then constructs a gate of jade carved with nine dragons, and burning the Kaja document to ash, chants what she has written. Then, the Wu Lung offers herself to the August Personage as a sacrifice, standing in the gate and awaiting the sun's wrath.

Perhaps the Excellent Archer was granted his life by the August Personage. In any event, no Wu Lung to use this rote has ever been so favored. Indeed, the very name of the rite is forbidden; the few sorcerers who know of it have taken, ironically, to using a Japanese word for it, because the true Chinese name is now unknown.

System: This Effect was first mentioned in *Mage Revised* (p. 160). It uses a Correspondence Effect to open a gate to the sun's photosphere. Easy enough, right?

Wrong.

The Effect is always vulgar. Its threshold of success is determined by the Storyteller, based on the size of the area the Wu Lung wishes to affect, but the threshold is never less than 15 successes. This area of effect will annihilate something the size of a small house, and do a significant amount of collateral damage as superheated air creates a localized firestorm. The ritual takes several undisturbed hours to perform and shoddy work on the chanting or calligraphy is sufficient to ruin the entire thing. The Wu Lung's paradigm doesn't allow it.

The Wu Lung must stand in the jade gate from which the fire will come. In this manner, the Wu Lung sacrifices herself to the August Personage of Jade on behalf of the Dragon Emperor, keeping with the ancient tradition in that human sacrifice must accompany petitions to him. Theoretically, an enlightened sage or the Dragon Emperor himself could perform the ritual without sacrificing himself, but in any event, ancient tradition demands it. A Wu Lung's personal vision of Heaven may not require it, but no Wu Lung with such radical ideas has ever been entrusted with it. A paradigm isn't all fun and games.

This ritual has been presented as a dramatic tool for Storytellers and as a vehicle to present the nature of high ritual among the Wu Lung. Use it with discretion.

KUEI LUNG CHUAN: DRAGON SPIRIT KUNG FU

This martial art is the specialty of the Tiger School, although other Wu Lung may learn it. In addition, the style focuses on an assortment of weaponry, such as the jian (straight sword) and spear. Kuei Lung Chuan is an external style that favors large, sweeping movements, acrobatics and high kicks. It fosters a passionate, resolute attitude. The Wu Lung guard this art jealously and never teach it to outsiders.

Systems: Kuei Lung Chuan is described here using the system found in *Kindred of the East* (pp. 140-142) and the *Kindred of the East Companion* (pp. 131-134). Storytellers have to decide whether a Wu Lung pays extra points for the skill or learns fewer maneuvers as in the *Kindred of the East Companion*.

Kuei Lung Chuan is a hard-style martial art. Its techniques include: Dragon Tail Sweep, Thunder Kick, Tiger Claw, Withering Grasp, and Killing Blows. Sifu of the Tiger School may know additional maneuvers as well, but the Wu Lung is still limited to the number allowed by her Martial Arts rating.

WU-KENG

INTRODUCTION: A DEITION'S DIARY

I am pleased to report that the akuma Li Rong will no longer mock Heaven with her Second Breath. With the help of your Chi'n Ta allies, she faced the judgement of the sun. As I have been ordered to cooperate fully with them, we have surrendered her corpse to the Subtle Ladies at their request. They assure me that they will purify the remains and then return them to us.

I found this notebook among the personal effects of the akuma as I was preparing to burn them. I have not told the Venerable Women of its existence; while contrary to your August Person's wishes, Li Rong's writings, however influenced by her maddened, defiled state, may offer useful insights into the Society of the Crippled Lotus.

As always, I await your enlightened guidance.

Ping Lam

Third Minister of the Divine Thread

I've got a story to tell you, sisters.

When I was a little boy, so far from the thin, dead woman I am now, I used to steal. My mother didn't care where I was, and didn't feed me, either, so I learned to put my small fingers to use, the tourists' wallets promising me a bit of congee and bread.

One day, squeezed between the grownups, my fingers were caught. A man held my fingers tight, close to the pocket from which I'd tried to fish his wallet. Through his yellow teeth he hissed "little shit!" in English, his dirty nails gripping and dragging me away. His pale irises stared at me, blue drops that never blinked.

"I've been waiting to feed a slanty little rat like you," he said, throwing me into the alley, "something so sweet. I'm paying for it, aren't I?"

I could smell fish on his breath. His tongue was gray and wiggled like a hooked centipede an inch from my nose.

One hand held me against the bricks, and the other fluttered against me. "If you're good, maybe I'll let you keep the mon—"

It stopped there. He twitched, and his eyes wept blood. He seemed so confused, dying, as if the game he was playing had suddenly been reversed. And behind him was a smiling, toothless woman, running fingers through his hair, stroking with long nails.

She looked at me, her eyes a thousand times more alive than my mother's.

"What's your name, boy?" She hobbled forth, her lilting Cantonese filling the air.

"Shiu-Chung."

"Mine's Ma. Would you like to help me carry these peaches home?"

And there is where my damnation began.

The Chou yan say that you can give anything up for survival's sake. I learned to release my boyhood with every

bite from Ma's kitchen, every call of "mui" and "Li Rong." I let go of running and playing when the bindings broke my feet.

All I have left is my soul, though I had to go to hell to claim it.

A PITTANCE: THE HISTORY OF THE WU-KENG

I know, most of you were raised into the Arts, and learned the stories between tilling the garden and brushing characters. But sometimes we need to relearn our stories, especially when we suspect they might be lies.

The night A-ma broke my feet, she laid me down on the floor and lit a candle for me at the altar, and told me this story:

"Little mui, you aren't suffering alone. We all chose the pain so that our ways might live. For three thousand years, it has been the way of the Wu-Keng, to twist in agony rather than be broken by our enemies. Would you prefer death to this?"

The man crying blood, jerking like a broken puppet. "No, A-ma."

"Once, we guided the Shang. We gave them writing and loved their cruel gods for them. We were husbands, wives, fathers and mothers to the ghosts, the wind and the rain. We traveled to the Heavenly Flower Garden to tell them of births to come and dug into the yellow earth to call for the dead. Men and women practiced the Arts together, traveling the Divine Road between worlds.

"Their foolish successors, the Chou, spat on our gifts. They entertained themselves with secular Legalism and vain leaning. Books ground the wisdom of the oracle bones into dead sheets of paper, and some of us treacherously claimed that a virtuous scholar could rival the gods. These scholar-wizards banished us from the rulers' sides and laughed at the voices of the dead that issued from our mouths.

"Of all of our lovers and children, only the Princes of Feng-tu answered our plea. Three millennia ago Lord Ku of the Thousand Tears showered the tomb of the Yellow Emperor with lotus petals to honor our arrival. We implored Feng-tu to return us to a place of honor.

"Lord Ku asked, 'How can we storm Heaven without proof of your fidelity?'

"A Chou yan tore the Divine Bones from her forehead and bent them into a bracelet saying, 'You have my soul, you have my love.'

"Lord Ku replied, 'A marriage's greatest gift is offspring. How will you bring me sons?'

"The Chou yan replied, 'every year we will steal you a strong son, to raise as a shaman, and he will honor Feng-tu with the Juk Ak.'

"Lord Ku prophesied the Sam Chin Ak. There would be thousand years of Secrecy, when the Wu-Keng hid from the mortal world. The next thousand would bring the Silence, when the shamans served Feng-tu's wishes. Finally, the Age

of Motion would prepare us to master the Middle Kingdom once again. Lord Ku forbade us the power to bind spirits or change the passage of moments so that we could not bend our benefactors' desires or cheat the span of our union.

"When the arrogant Chou lost the Mandate of Heaven, we did all that Feng-tu would permit to protect our countrymen. In our compassion, we turned to the scholar-wizards, hoping to cast aside our differences for the good of the common people.

"Our former brethren had strayed farther from Heaven's will than we had dreamed. Calling themselves the Wu Lung, they found a cruel little boy from the state of Qin to control and bind the Middle Kingdom to his will. Qin Shihuang became a weapon for the Dragon Wizards to use against their enemies. Rival scholars' works were burned, and we were captured and tortured.

"The Wu Lung envied the youth and vigor that Feng-tu bestowed on its favorites. On their urging, Qin Shihuang ordered that one Wu-Keng be boiled alive every day they refused to divulge the secrets of immortality. To prevent escape, the prisoners' feet were sawed off.

"Finally, the Wu Lung claimed that one of our number had taken the shape of a cricket and whispered our secrets in his ear. The First Emperor ordered our executions, but we called upon Feng-tu to save us. In their wisdom, they disguised us as women and spirited us to freedom.

"The Juk Ak decreed that we should thereafter take the form of women and bind our feet for their pleasure — and to remind us of our imperfection. Heaven avenged itself upon the Qin Empire; while peasants burned the fortresses of the Wu Lung, we settled the south — where a few still knew how to honor us — and followed the will of our divine benefactors. We obeyed the Silence.

"Shaolin warrior-monks campaigned on our behalf, and barbarians came from the West to enfeeble the Qing and claim Hong Kong. In this millennium of Motion, the Japanese fools reveled in their conquests, never knowing whose hand guided the bombings and burnings. The great Chou yan, Zhen Di, raised an army to massacre the last of the Dragon Wizards, but the communists and their machines killed her before she could accomplish this righteous task.

"I'm telling you this Li Rong, because you have the Divine Bones of a shaman linking you to the spirit worlds. Like the Chou yan before you, you will give a Prince of the Slain the Juk Ak and learn the shaman's arts."

You know the story, my sisters, but read it again with your heart. Read the words that of wounded your soul and crippled your body, and know that they are lies.

THE HIDDEN CALLING

We journeyed north (so much easier now that we are a part of China again!) for my initiation, my feet in agony, the ng holding me close when I stumbled. Aunt Ma told me that

it would have been easier had I been taken as a baby, and my feet allowed to twist inside their wrapping.

The Yellow Emperor's tomb was a yellow earth terrace no different from the hundreds I'd seen on our voyage. We all took turns digging the pit, careful to search for grave goods that may have risen out of the earth (such discoveries are most auspicious — he sends his blessing). My *ng* produced tortoise shells with masterful characters praising the Juk Ak.

A-ma went into the trance first, surrounded by burning incense, eyes wet with tears and teeth clenched, opening herself to Feng-tu. The others followed, clawing at the earth, hissing, veins swelling on their arms and foreheads.

A spray of earth and roaring wind heralded the Juk Ak's arrival. The air rippled with heat. The Prince sprang forth, eighteen eyes burning, fanged faces leering in every direction.

"Where is my bride?" it said, hovering above the pit.

I stepped to the edge. Where the muddy bottom had been was a lightless abyss.

"Where is my dowry?" It placed a foot upon the threshold, and the grasses withered.

I bowed, as I had been taught. I could feel his hand pass overhead. I expected pain, but there was nothing.

"Where is my caress?" I looked up. He had dirty nails, fish breath and a great gray tongue. Steaming and slick, a jade bracelet adorned his pale arm.

I screamed as I had been taught. A-ma told me that it would lessen the pain.

ANCIENT GIFTS

Smiling old Ma vanished. Now, she was a harsh teacher, rapping my hands when my carving went awry and hissing at me through her ragged gums to startle me out of a feeble trance. I could feel my Divine Bones rolling on the Juk Ak's arm, forever linking my soul to his power. I drew strength from him with gifts and flattery. Beautiful characters flowed from my hand, writing poetry that praised him as a lover and sage. Incense and wine covered an altar arranged to his glory. Together, the *ng* shared stories of our liberation from the Wu Lung thanks to our benefactors' wisdom.

Sometimes this wasn't enough. The oracle bones cracked in the fire, and we were ordered to prove our sincerity. Sometimes, he only wanted a jade figure. But when we were truly faithless, he cursed us with other demands. Severed heads would stare from our pit to correct us.

I remember when I toyed with my brush in the midst of some ode to his beauty, and Ma grabbed my hair and pulled me to her face.

"Don't you understand?" she snapped, talons sprouting to threaten my eyes. "If you disappoint him, we'll all suffer. We are so close to victory, Li Rong. If we fail now, we fail everyone."

LEXICON

A-ji: "Aunt." a Wu-Keng's superior, but not her teacher.

A-ma: "Mother." The leader of an *ng* and a mentor.

Chan Fa: "Flower Inspection." A journey to the Heavenly Flower Garden to divine new births and commune with the spirits. Impossible for the Wu-Keng, who cannot command Spirit magic.

Chou yan: "Smoke." The six remaining Wu-Keng from the Chou dynasty, who know their masters' true natures. Missing since 1999.

Chu-Sheng: Awakening.

Divine Bones: 36 ethereal bones that connect a shaman to the Heavenly Flower Garden. A Wu-Keng's Divine Bones are shaped into the Juk Ak.

Divine Road: The path of the shaman that only she may see, which connects her to the spirit worlds. Lost to Infernalist Wu Kung

Feng-tu: Formerly the netherworld in Wu-Keng cosmology, now a Yomi realm ruled by the Yama King Ku of the Thousand Tears. Its true nature is unknown to most Wu-Keng.

Heavenly Flower Garden: The spirit realm where the souls of the dead await rebirth in the form of flowers. Every person has a flower that blooms upon their birth. Unreachable by Infernalists.

Juk Ak: "Jade Bracelet." The Avatar of a Wu-Keng and the repository for her soul after death. Also, a Prince of Feng-tu who wears such a bracelet and is the symbolic husband of an Infernalist.

Kei tsip si: "Concubine." A Wu-Keng who controls her *ngan* through sexual means.

Khay ma: A shaman who is a symbolic mother to a spirit or Juk Ak. There are also Khay kong, who are symbolic fathers.

Man Mae Phax: "Young Woman." An apprentice to a Man Saeg Phax.

Man Saeg Phax: "Old Woman." An elder shaman who is not bound to a Juk Ak.

Mui: "Girl." A Wu-Keng spoken of by one who is greater in station. An apprentice.

Ng: A Wu-Keng cabal consisting of one Mui, three A-ji, and one A-ma.

Ngan: "Eye." A person who handles the Wu-Keng's business with the outside world

Sam Chin Ak: The three-thousand-year period of concubinage and servitude that binds the Wu-Keng to Infernal service. The pact was supposed to have ended in 2000, but the Princes of the Slain claim that the Chou yan broke the agreement.

Wu: A shaman or sorcerer. Now used to describe peasant magicians who are not of the Wu-Keng.

THE BRIDES OF FENG-TU

Before their oaths to the Princes of the Slain, the peasant sorcerers described their relationship with the spirits in familial or romantic terms. Ancient songs described the gods as inconstant lovers and the shaman as the companion who tames their capriciousness with tenderness. If a child died at birth, the shaman acted as a Khay ma or Khay kong, a symbolic mother or father. The initiation described above is a perversion of that bond.

When scholar-magi drove the Wu-Keng into a desperate bargain with Feng-tu, their demonic masters twisted this love into concubinage and servitude. The Divine Bones that link the shaman to the Heavenly Flower Garden were twisted into Juk Ak, the bracelets that yoke a spirit's soul to the Yama Kings. A Juk Ak demon treats "his" shaman as a slave, lover and victim. Magic ultimately comes from flattering the monster who wears her power around his arm.

However, a Juk Ak isn't watching his consort every second of the day. The Wu-Keng's belief in their servitude provides the power, and that power can be used without the Juk Ak's approval. Of course, all who have ever tried have been caught, and now languish in the Thousand Hells to await the pleasure of their masters.

TREACHERY AND HOPE

My devotion was rewarded. I learned what my Juk Ak craved and provided it, no matter how distasteful. My ngan were fearful and efficient; for my love and mercy, they brought me secrets and sacrifices. It was only a matter of time until they reported old Ma's betrayal.

They carried me to the little aluminum and shingle hut that her students built to conceal their work. A mile away, I could see her berate her secret pupils through the Heavenly Gate my Juk Ak had so thoughtfully blessed me with.

I decapitated two renegade mui with the strong, sharp hair my Prince granted me. The third's Divine Bones shone, and red-ink characters leaped off the paper to suffocate me. My Juk Ak smiled, and a line of his hearth-fire followed the flowing script back to the artist, until he fled along a dragon line, howling from the burns. Ma just sat in the corner, smiling her empty smile.

"Shiu-Chung," she said, "The future is theirs now. I trained them to seize it, before we squeeze all the life out of the old ways. I suppose I just got tired of raising brides for demons."

"The Juk Ak will fulfil their promise. Honk Kong is ours already. We — what did you call me?"

"Shiu-Chung. Your name. Do you really think that the Princes of the Slain keep our souls for safekeeping? But wait! You'll find out for yourself."

Her eyes were so wonderfully, insanely alive. They were mother's eyes, so rare and wonderful to me that I never saw her claws enter my throat.

Hell was full of lessons, my sisters. Sometimes, I joined a parade of ng in a cripple's march across a desert of black sand, pulled by heavy jade collars. Sometimes I attended my Juk Ak, who caressed me as an oily flame, or in the body of a yellow toothed tourist who had just caught me stealing.

But old Ma knew I would return. She knew I held enough rage to smash my jade yoke and steal the Second Breath.

My fellow "Kuei-jin" call me with soft words, offering the comfort of a family of corpses. But my perfect, dead body only exists for you, my sisters. I've returned from hell to tell you this truth:

We haven't sold our souls for victory, or power, or even the lofty plans of some would-be Demon Emperor. We serve the vices of petty men, who surely rule hell as much as they rule the earth.

Now I watch the burned one and eat the mui who stalk him. He's a father to the orphaned dead, and he tells his students about a place where our souls will bloom again.

I only hope that he'll adopt mine, and let it lie among the flowers..

BLESSINGS FROM A CRIPPLED LOTUS

In 2000, the Wu-Keng are to end their service to the Juk Ak. While everyone knows that demons rarely keep their word, few Wu-Keng realize that they serve hell. Only the Chou yan know the true nature of their masters; through the '90s these six ancient Chi'n Ta prepare for the rebellion by secretly training a few A-ma in the Spirit Arts and the pure traditions of the shamans. Such shamans see the Juk Ak for the demons they are and pass on the lessons of the Chou yan to independent Chin Ta and talented neophytes. These pure ng carry the true spirit of the peasant sorcerers, uncorrupted by demonic influence.

Ironically, when the Yama King Ku of the Thousand Tears uncovered the Chou yan's duplicity, he used it to justify a new Age of Silence, lasting until the renegade shamans were annihilated. As some of the most powerful Chi'n Ta left on earth, the Chou yan managed to protect the shamans and throw Feng-tu into disarray, until Lord Ku devoured their Juk Ak (and the demons holding them), condemning their souls to Oblivion.

Freed from the strictures of the Sam Chin Ak, the new shamans multiplied to the point where they rival the Wu-Keng in number, though not in power. The Wu-Keng now implore Lord Ku to allow more initiations, but Lord Ku stands by his bargain; if his slaves gain ground too soon, then he'll be denied their precious suffering.

PEASANT MAGIC

The Wu-Keng were originally shamans and herbalists, the heirs of Fu Hsi, the Animal Tamer, and Na Kua, who repaired the pillar of Heaven and mended the sky with blue stones. Ancient heroes like these taught humanity the arts of fire, agriculture and the other secrets that spawned Chinese civilization.

The shamans were usually granted their powers after a serious trauma changed their lives. Some suffered through a difficult birth, while others lost their children, wives or husbands. Shamans from birth had Divine Bones, 36 joints that connected their souls to Heaven. In most people, these bones are broken at birth, but these shamans never lost them. Pain and loss allowed older shamans to find the Divine Road that runs from the spirit worlds to the Middle Kingdom. Both men and women could be shamans, although women who had suffered through the death of their children had natural guides in the spirit worlds.

A fully Awakened shaman bound himself to both the Bones and the Road and sent her soul to the Heavenly Flower Garden. There, she courted the gods with songs and artwork, until they accepted him as their agent on earth. If the shamans had lost mortal lovers and children, they became her tutelary spirits; as conduits to the spirit worlds and native advocates, they gained enough merit to ensure an auspicious rebirth. To the shamans, magic was the art of divine romance and the guardianship of the dead.

Under the Chou, the shamans' ways were ignored or reviled, and out of desperation they turned to Feng-tu. Under their new obligations, the shamans' magic changed considerably. The Wu-Keng were to have only one paramour, their Infernal patron, and they were forbidden to contact the children and lovers they nurtured on the other side of the Wall. Without these advocates, Heaven turned its back on the Wu-Keng.

Thus, the Wu-Keng's magic is a perversion of the ancient ways, compelling them to love the very beings who twist their bodies and souls. The tools of divine agency have been reduced to garish accolades for the Juk Ak. The original practices of the shamans remain only with the scattered *ng* that were initiated by the repentant Chou yan and their confidants.

BELIEFS

While the shamans believe that the gods of China literally exist, they assert that the Celestial Bureaucracy is a recent event, a device of the Most High to try and touch an overly intellectual people. In the Heavenly Flower Garden, the gods cultivate the souls of the next generation. While the Infernalist Wu-Keng can no longer travel there, they do believe that when the Sam Chin Ak is lifted, all the souls stored in Juk Ak will float to the Garden, where virtuous births in healthy bodies await them.

The gods must be flattered, even flirted with. As these affairs brought the god's power to the shaman, the Wu-Keng's devil-husband grants her access to his gifts. Affairs between gods and mortals were often one-sided (how do you flatter Thunder?) and ultimately doomed, but a command of etiquette, beautiful verse and the use of oracles helped the shaman end a liaison without provoking their wrath. The Wu-Keng still use poetry and sacrifice to pry more power out of their patrons. The dead were divine advocates for the shaman, especially if they were close to her. A Khay ma or Khay kong received a defender for life and an ambassador to the spirit worlds by honoring them. As for the Wu-Keng, they are occasionally given companions as well; petty demons that abuse the misplaced nurturing of their "mothers."

As the shamans rebuild their Arts from ancient tradition and modern Cantonese ritual, the greatest Khay ma have taken the title Man Saeg Phax, or "Venerable Lady," to distinguish themselves from the Infernalist A-ji. The fall of the Chou yan leaves both the peasant sorcerers and Wu-Keng no decisive advantage; as the true shamans grow in number, each fears the day a quiet rivalry may break into open war.

THE ANCIENT ARTS

The shaman's Arts were meant to honor the gods, care for the dead and heal the rift between the earth and the spirit worlds. This was not a task to be undertaken lightly, and their magic — slow, careful rituals that are tailored to the time, place and season — reflect this. To the shaman, magic was a fleeting love affair with the gods, and wistful songs and passionate rituals were preferred over formulaic libations and stilted speeches.

Even when they become enlightened enough to abandon them, modern shamans (including the Wu-Keng) rarely discard ritual tools; to do otherwise trivializes the gifts of Heaven and risk the anger of an offended god. Sample foci include:

Oracle Bones: Tortoise shells and the shoulder bones of cattle are prepared by carving indentations and Shang characters. When held over a fire, the bones split along the indentations, revealing the future or influencing fate with the results.

Clappers: These are a pair of blocks carved in the shape of tortoise shells. Clapped together, they can alter the minds of listeners and rouse the spirits.

Pits: A hole in the earth brings the shaman closer to the Yellow Springs and the spirits of the dead. For Wu-Keng, it allows them to communicate with their Juk Ak and offer gifts and sacrifices.

Trance States: To see what is hidden from normal sight, a shaman should use quiet music, wine, fire and other stimuli to put herself into a trance. This opens the mind to the invisible realm and allows spirits and ghosts to enter the body. The Wu-Keng use trance states to remove any doubts when confronted with their Juk Ak.

Songs and Poetry: To flatter the gods, a shaman must sing a song worthy of their attention. A beautiful poem, spoken or written in a lovely hand, can also be effective.

History: The Wu-Keng cling to their legacy as a source of power. Re-enacting their torment at the hands of Qin Shihuang and their betrothal to the Princes of Feng-tu strengthens their loyalty by reproducing the pain of those events. Other shamans call on the legends of Fu Hsi and Nu Kua for the power of creation.

Written Charms: Brushed with red ink, classical Chinese characters can transmit the power of their meanings or simply send a message across geographical or metaphysical boundaries. Gold or silver paper invokes the power of money, which bends minds and attracts even the dead.

SHARDS OF JADE: ROTES

The Wu-Keng use extended, subtle rituals unless pressed by urgency or danger. At those times, these Chi'n Ta's ruthlessness shows, as bodies boil and minds are broken to keep their promises to Feng-tu. They pursue their goals with utmost secrecy, working through their ngan if they absolutely must deal with other sorcerers. Thus, the Wu-Keng are experts in magics that conceal their presence or hide their influence.

KISS OF THE VIRTUOUS MAIDEN

(•• Correspondence, •• Forces)

This rote is used for self-defense or on those rare occasions when a Wu-Keng must kill someone herself. The shaman writes a brief poem pledging to be faithful to her Juk Ak. She burns it and conceals a small weapon nearby. When locked in an embrace or a struggle, the Wu-Keng can produce the weapon from her mouth and attack by surprise, wielding it with as much force as she could by holding it in her hand.

System: Correspondence moves the weapon to the desired location (it could also be mounted in her hair or hidden up her sleeve, though the mouth is most common) while Forces allows it to strike without any penalties. This is almost always coincidental when a needle or razor blade is used but is rarely so when the Chi'n Ta spits out a foot-long blade or a pistol.

TWISTED YARROW STALKS

(••• Mind 3, •• Correspondence, •• Entropy)

Wu-Keng use this ritual to stymie attempts to spy on them. Since a simple Ban announces the sorcerer's power as much as it hides her actions, the Wu-Keng prefer instead to provide false information. Twisted Yarrow Stalks gets its name from the instruments that are used to conduct *I Ching* divination; the Wu-Keng twists yarrow stalks and smashes oracle bones, returning these Arts to their original chaos, before entering a trance in which she calls on her Juk Ak to conceal her from her enemies.

System: Correspondence wards the location, while Entropy and Mind create random false impressions.

WIND-WATER SKEIN

(••• Correspondence, ••• Matter, •• Forces, •• Prime)

With Wind-Water Skein, a Wu-Keng is able to create and animate nearly indestructible threads of silk. She can use these to attack, harass or transport a subject.

First, the Wu-Keng makes a bridal gown whose pattern contains verses of praise for her Juk Ak. She leaves one ragged edge whose threads are attached to one or more needles. When she dons the gown, these needles and their threads are able to travel an unlimited distance, snaking around objects and through crevices; as long as one end of the thread is unseen, the other can appear almost anywhere.

When used offensively, a needle can strike a target. Once embedded, the Wu-Keng can throw, reel in, or simply immobilize the target. The strength of the silk makes it an ideal garrote, although it cannot cut through flesh without encircling the victim.

System: A Wu-Keng can send a thread as far as her successes allow. Once a needle strikes, it is very difficult to remove due to the Forces enchantment upon it. A needle strike does one health level of damage per success past the threshold, and has two points of Strength per success for the purpose of removing a needle, escaping a garrote or binding attempt, or to calculate damage when the victim is smashed against things.

The Wu-Keng may also pull an immobilized or impaled victim or snag a small object. Both are pulled through a series of small crevices and out of the way places until they are brought to the Wu-Keng. Due to the complexity of the Effect, it requires at least three successes, plus one for each person or object being transported. This Effect is almost always vulgar.

HEAVEN'S TUMBLING PEBBLES

(•••••••• Correspondence, •• Entropy)

It is said that Na Kua used blue pebbles to build the vault of Heaven. The Wu-Keng reverses this gift, making movement through space unpredictable. The shaman simply crushes a blue stone or shatters a blue porcelain bowl, and can step between the tumbling shards of Heaven that result. She can use this to affect herself, others or an area where walking across the room is a mind-bending, heroic feat.

System: Entropy makes spacial relationships random, with the only condition being that the end point of the journey is safe for the Wu-Keng. The Correspondence ••• version is used to teleport the Wu-Keng to a random safe location to stymie pursuit. The Correspondence •••• version does this for a group, who may be transported to the same location together or to individual random locations. The Correspondence ••••• version is the most spectacular; the shaman turns a location into a seething storm of shattered

space where adjacent locations interact randomly. While each “pebble” of space is safe, one never knows where he might end up. Take note that the safety condition mentioned earlier is usually not invoked for anyone besides the Wu-Keng and her ngan. While this can be used to obliterate her enemies by inverting or bisecting them (lethal damage), the Wu-Keng usually chooses to utterly confound their enemies instead. Tread lightly!

EBON DRAGON'S TIDE

(•••• Entropy, ••• Life, •• Prime, •• Matter)

Legends tell of a black dragon flooding China with plague-ridden waters. Only the efforts of Na Kua halted the deluge. However, a Wu-Keng knows where to unravel her influence. The shaman digs a fresh pit and petitions Fengtu to release the dark waters from the innards of the earth. The gout that streams forth rots flesh and drowns victims in its rapid current and destroys the living earth it touches.

System: This rote conjures a stream of black, foul-smelling water that is infused with corrupting energies; contact with the water rots flesh, causing aggravated damage, and can drown or sweep away the un-

fortunate caught in its path. The land the water travels over turns forever barren, and small animals and children who drink from any nearby streams or wells sicken and die. At least three successes are required to produce a small jet of the stuff; five, 10, or more are necessary to wither a given area.



HUA TO'S CURE

(•••• Spirit, •• Prime; optional •• Life)

Among the shamans, soul loss is seen to be the most common cause of various illnesses. By calling on the deified healer Hua To with songs and written invocations, a shaman can prevent spirit and heal the body by fortifying the spirit. The shaman uses Hua To's symbol, the horsetail brush, to mark the patient that the divine doctor will heal.

System: Prime and Spirit create “phantom health,” producing energized ephemera inside the patient. This reduces the subject’s wound penalties as if he were actually healed. Furthermore, damaging spirit Gifts and Spirit Effects must tear through the stuff before they can hurt the subject; these treat the ephemera like real flesh. Used in conjunction with Life •••, Hua To’s Cure physically heals

one health level per success and adds a “buffer” of one “health level” of ephemera for each level healed. At the Storyteller’s discretion, this can also fortify the subject against shapechanger Gifts.

NA KUA'S GIFT

(••• Matter, ••• Forces, •• Prime)

Some legends say that Na Kua created the human race out of yellow earth and mud. While a shaman can’t match that feat with Na Kua’s Gift, he can create a servant from the very earth.

By writing the tale of Na Kua, passionately praising her and entering a trance, a shaman opens himself to her affection and the gift of creation.

System: Matter shapes the earth into a desirable form, and Forces and Mind animate it. Such constructs usually have one dot of Strength and Stamina per success, and the Dexterity of their creator.

ETERNAL DISCIPLINE OF THE FAITH

(•••• Spirit, •••• Prime, •• Mind, •• Entropy)

This is a generic term for a number of rituals that joins a shaman to a ghost as a mystical parent, husband or wife.

The shaman enacts the appropriate ritual just as if she were being joined to a living human and then dedicates a place on her altar with red-ink charms, candles, and burned gold and silver paper.

System: This ritual turns the shaman into a Fetter for a specific, willing wraith. A shaman can do this as many times as she likes, but such a shaman makes a very tempting hostage for an unscrupulous necromancer.

BLESS THE HEAVENLY FLOWER

(•••• Entropy, •••• Life, •••• Spirit)

Entering a deep trance, the shaman travels to the Heavenly Flower Garden and tends the flowers of a benevolent ghost's family. When they have bloomed enough to produce more life, that family gives birth to a baby who is forever guarded by her family's ghost. In extreme cases, she may be that ghost, reincarnated in mortal flesh.

System: This rite requires 10 successes or more, depending on the eventual importance of the child to the Storyteller's plot and whether the child is destined to be a Chi'n Ta or some kind of shen, who are more difficult to bind to the dead. The shaman initiates the pregnancy with Life; Entropy and Spirit create a strong Resonance that allows the ghost to her use powers more easily while defending the child. Typically, the Gauntlet is lowered by one per success beyond the threshold. If the gods are willing, the ghost might also reincarnate as the child; such an infant may remember her past life or have a special destiny but is otherwise a normal infant. This is purely up to the Storyteller. The Effect is permanent.

GO TI TA

(•••• Life, •••• Spirit)

One of the few combat-oriented magics of the peasant sorcerers, **Go Ti Ta** refers to a fertility ritual where combatants spar with deer antlers. Deer are inscribed on a Oracle Bone, and when it has been cast to the fire, the shaman may move with the deer's grace and the gods' blessing.

System: This combines **Better Body** with the ability to temporarily use one spirit's Gifts; the shaman receives increased Strength and Dexterity while housing a spirit from the Yang World. Sometimes, the shaman also grows horns, but usually she just uses horned headgear for the fight ahead. Successes are divided to fuel each part of the Effect.

GIFTS OF THE CRIPPLED LOTUS

Forbidden the use of Spirit and Time Effects, and driven by their devotion to their Infernal masters, the Wu-Keng twist tradition to perform their magic. The pits dug by A-ji are filled with bloody sacrifices, and their poetry praises the

barbarous deeds of their Juk Ak. Although they are born male, Wu-Keng are usually raised as women; while this balances the Yin and Yang energies inside them, their humiliating service to the Juk Ak poisons their femininity and makes it difficult for them to use it for anything but destruction.

The Juk Ak act like abusers the world over; after the degradation, they win back their subjects' loyalty with small kindnesses and assurances that, any day now, the torture will stop. Even the most dedicated A-ma is beginning to see a pattern emerge. Behind the flattering songs and frightened smiles, rage trembles.

INVESTMENTS

When Wu-Keng please their masters, they are often granted Demonic Investments. This renews the shaman's loyalty by giving her special powers while alienating her even further from humankind. Occasionally, a Juk Ak may give an Investment to his concubine to perform a particular task or even to fulfil a bizarre aesthetic impulse.

A starting character can purchase up to five points of Investments. Whenever the Wu-Keng completes a mission for the Juk Ak, she may be rewarded with further Investments based on how difficult the mission was and how much corruption and sorrow were left in its wake. While these Investments aren't purchased *per se*, the Storyteller selects Flaws of equal value, representing the ravages of demonic power on the body, mind, and spirit. Unlike other Infernalists, the Wu-Keng cannot gain power through a pact; the Princes of the Slain already own their souls, so they must pay for their powers through torment.

A Wu-Keng is by no means limited to these powers. With storyteller approval, the character may purchase the demonic gifts found in *Infernalm: The Path of Screams*, *Freak Legion: A Player's Guide to Fomori*, or *The 1000 Hells*.

Sign of the Yellow Emperor (3 points): The Wu-Keng develops an oddly shaped rash or burn somewhere on her body (the Juk Ak's choice). If any shen or human cultist who is aligned with Infernal powers or the forces of Entropy sees the mark, they may not harm her, and her difficulty on Social rolls involving them is two lower.

Lord Ku's Kiss (3 points each): Legend has it that when he first came to the Wu's aid, Lord Ku tore out the tongue of a faithless shaman and bound it to his belt to warn the shamans not to take their oaths to Feng-tu lightly. The Prince of a Thousand Tears has granted the gifts of his belt to favored Wu-Keng since then.

Lord Ku's Kiss allows a Wu-Keng to detach her own tongue (it grows back in a week, or sooner with Life magic) and implant it in the body of a ngan or other subject, usually during a kiss. The Wu-Keng then knows where the tongue's

"SO I'M A CROSS-DRESSING DEVIL WORSHIPER?"

Pretty much. Well, not quite. First of all, while the Wu-Keng are biologically male, few think of themselves as men wearing women's clothes. They have been raised as women and don't give the issue a second thought. However, most Wu-Keng feel a certain shame about their identities that has been carefully cultivated by the Princes of the Slain.

This shame is the key to the Wu-Keng's willful ignorance of the nature of the entities they serve. To a mui fresh from the Yellow Emperor's tomb, her Juk Ak is a benevolent spirit who needs harsh proof of her loyalty. A-ji and A-ma treat their torments like just desserts; by this stage in a Wu-Keng's life, she has been so terrorized by the web of punishment and reward that she gives little thought to the morality of it all. A few brave souls still fiercely clutch their dignity and undermine their masters' plans by supporting the shamans that have been trained outside Feng-tu clutches.

The Wu-Keng are not willing tools of evil, but most don't feel a great deal of regret for their sins. Under the rule of the Juk Ak, they accept their lot with pained determination but await the day when they will be released — or escape — their masters.

host is at all times, and she can speak to him through bone induction as the tongue slithers and taps his body.

Furthermore, if the host displeases her, the tongue may be used to tear through his internal organs, doing the Wu-Keng's Manipulation in dice of lethal damage until it is removed, pierced or cut (usually involving a self-inflicted wound to the host) or destroyed with Life magic (this typically requires a single success). Each purchase of this Investment allows the Wu-Keng to have one Kiss active at any one time.

Flesh of the Moon (5 points): This terrible power suffuses the Wu-Keng's body with Yin energy, granting her unnatural fortitude and turning her into a walking garden of dark power. Her skin turns porcelain white, and she looks more like a marionette or a preserved corpse than a human being. She also becomes physically female permanently, which makes this a popular choice for many kei tsip si.

The Wu-Keng receives the benefits of the *Insensitive to Pain* Merit (*Mage Revised*, p. 288), and can soak lethal damage (difficulty 6). However, the Yin energies that sustain her give her three permanent traits of Entropic Resonance. While the Wu-Keng always finds it easier to cast chaotic,

mysterious or enervating magic (-1 difficulty), sorcery attuned to life, light, and energy become that much harder to cast. (+1 difficulty). The burning Yang energy of the sun adds two to the difficulty of all nonmagical rolls in daylight, and her unnatural appearance and callousness adds one to the difficulty of Social rolls at all times.

Furthermore, the Wu-Keng's body and spirit become rugged enough to endure Soul Treatments (see *The 1000 Hells*, pp. 114-115). A Wu-Keng who undergoes a Soul Treatment is watched very carefully for signs of disloyalty.

Embrace of the Jade Prince (6 points): While Spirit magic is forbidden to the Wu-Keng, certain Juk Ak open their favorites' minds to Feng-tu, allowing one of their number to enter the shaman's body and use their powers at her request.

The Wu-Keng may channel the powers of a minor demon, gaining its powers for a scene. The most common Charms that are granted are Blighted Touch, Corruption, Create Wind and Blast Flame. The Wu-Keng also gains three additional dots of Physical Attributes but does not gain access to the demon's knowledge of the spirit worlds. Furthermore, the demon peers unimpeded into her most private thoughts and taints her spirit. Many hengeyokai thus despise a Wu-Keng with this power. To use this power, the Wu-Keng must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 8).

Stove God's Meal (2 points): The Wu-Keng gains a simple but useful power: All those who eat of a meal she has prepared are forever unable to speak ill of her, unless the enchantment is magically removed.

Braids of the Vain Bride (4 points): This Investment gives the recipient's hair an odd sheen and an unnatural color such as bone white or pale green. The Wu-Keng may alter the length of her hair at will and animate its strands. These gain the strength of steel wires and can slash, pierce, grapple and garrote her opponents with ease, typically doing Strength + 2 damage (roll Dexterity + Brawl to attack). The Wu-Keng adds two extra dice to her Dexterity when manipulating the hair to represent its flexibility and speed, but it cannot perform delicate work like lock-picking or calligraphy.

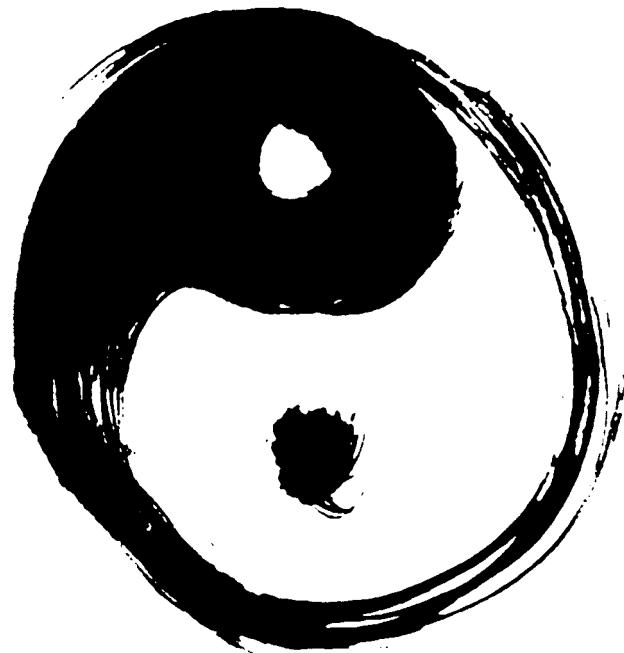
The Jade Urn (7 points): To evade pursuit or heal a mortal wound, the Wu-Keng may crawl into the earth to be healed by the energies of Feng-tu. The Wu-Keng falls into a restless sleep, punctuated by nightmares while buried underground; in this state, she may go without food, air or water indefinitely, and heal even the most severe injury, regrowing severed limbs and losing scars. She typically regains one health level per day, although regenerating an arm or leg may take a week or more besides. No plants will grow above the spot that she sleeps, and diseases will infest the local groundwater.

A Wu-Keng may stay in this state as long as desired, although she cannot use magic while buried beneath the ground. It is said that some of the Chou yan still lie underground in this state, waiting for the end of the Sam Chin Ak.

Concubine's Laugh (3 points): The Wu-Keng may glance into someone's eyes and learn their most shameful desire—something that they yearn for but would never want anyone to know about. The Investment then subtly colors the shaman's speech and body language to suggest this to the subject on a subconscious level. While she may never be able

to quite understand why, a mix of fear and desire inclines the victim to accede to the Wu-Keng's wishes. Of course, the Wu-Keng can also simply blatantly state the victim's secret desire if she so chooses or simply use the secret against her another way.

This Investment adds four dice to the Wu-Keng's Manipulation when she deals with that subject. At the Storyteller's discretion, very enlightened, bizarre, or shameless beings may be immune to this power.



A BONE CRACKED IN THE FIRE: THE FUTURE

Revered Ancestor,

I hope you will forgive my imprudence, but after reading the testament of the akuma Li Rong, I sent my scarlet screen, the Eight Tigers gang, to search the slums for this secret sorcerers' den.

I expected to find one pitiful band of superstitious peasants hiding from the Subtle Ladies with the help of primitive charms.

Instead, I found dozens of them.

Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing each hold a few cells of renegade shamans; for each one the Eight Tigers and the Crippled Lotus destroys, two more appear. The Venerable Women have politely asked me to appeal to your Enlightened Personage for assistance above and beyond what my own meager resources can provide. They have reminded me of the services they have performed for us in the past, such as detecting akuma, providing unique urns for our enjoyment, and other gifts that my contact said were private affairs between themselves and your August Presence.

I have, of course, burned Li Rong's writings. The only copy of those lies that survives is attached is in your August Person's hands.

My Eight Tigers are much depleted by the efforts, and one of my own shamans has suffered the Little Death when he was struck by peasant sorcery. Their magical talent seems most precocious considering their recent origin; is it possible that these treacherous Chou yan assist them still?

For my part, I plead for your help; while my heart remains loyal, I fear that I can no longer refuse the demands of the Crippled Lotus. Tonight, I feel their eyes behind me, and their kiss fresh in my throat.

It was an honor to serve you, my lord.



CHAPTER FOUR: BOUNTEOUS DIVERSITY



On a map of the world, the nations of the East are drawn with the same dark lines and labeled with the same stern letters as other countries on the rest of the map. But the boundaries of today have very little in common with the empires that rose and fell for thousands of years in the East, and the people who live in between those borders are often the descendants of forgotten nations that had far different shapes.

The diminutive nation of Cambodia, for example, covers a smaller area than the state of Oklahoma, yet it is home to five ethnic groups and uncounted primitive hill tribes, all native to the area. The vast lands of China shelter fifty-five ethnic minorities in addition to the Han majority. Each one of these ethnic groups, and the many others to be found in the East, maintains its own customs, language and belief systems — each a paradigm awaiting a mage.

A little bit of research can do a world of good for a player wishing to flesh out her character background or a Storyteller looking to add some depth to allies and adversaries. The Internet is an invaluable tool — within five minutes, a search for “Miao” (a Chinese minority group) with a typical search engine turns up some fascinating tidbits: the Miao are the same ethnicity as the Hmong of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand; there are more than eighty subdivisions within the group, each with its own dialect and variations of Miao custom; Miao religion involves the veneration of spirits, demons and ancestral ghosts, including shamans to protect the people from evil and priests to invoke the spirit world for good. For a Storyteller, this may be the beginning of a magical group with a unique approach to the Umbra; for the player of a Miao character, these background details inform the character’s views on everything from politics to the proper way to address spirits. With a computer or an old-fashioned library card, both players and Storytellers can create a more diverse, and therefore more interesting game.

SAGES, SAINTS, SCHOLARS, SOLDIERS — THE COUNCIL OF NINE IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM



The Traditions are, by necessity, diverse — they have, over the years, taken in magical groups that found themselves on the wrong side of the Order of Reason and found places for those groups within their organizations. In this manner, all of the Traditions have a presence in the East, each of them adapting to the prevailing culture in its own way.

While the Akashic Brotherhood is without a doubt the Tradition with the strongest ties to the Middle Kingdom, it is by no means the only one.

CELESTIAL CHORUS

Despite beliefs to the contrary, the Celestial Chorus is no stranger to the Middle Kingdom. In the Fourth Age, the Messianic Voices followed first the Nestorian Christians and later missionaries like John of Monte Corvino into China. For a time, the Chorus enjoyed a reasonable amount of success. Several Emperors accepted the Christian religion that the Chorus promoted, and both the Akashics and the Wu Lung enjoyed friendly relations with the foreign Tradition.

Sadly, this was not to last. European imperialism during the 18th and 19th centuries led to a violent backlash against the Chorus, breaking any power they once had in China.

Today, the Celestial Chorus holds two strongholds in Asia. One is the island of Bali in Indonesia, with a population of nearly three million Hindus. The Pejeng region's Gunung Kawi shrines are home to one of the Tradition's oldest chantries within the Middle Kingdom. The other is the Philippines. As the only predominately Christian nation in Asia, it caters to the more "Eurocentric" members. Outside of these areas, more conservative Chi'n Ta have taken a dim view of the Chorus, as attitudes formed during the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising continued to color opinions in the present. Choristers native to China are often shunned by fellow mages, and even those from Japan, Korea and Vietnam have less than tranquil relationships with other sects. However, now that the Avatar Storm has trapped many Akashic and Wu Lung elders beyond the Wall, younger Chi'n Ta, unburdened by events of the 19th century, have begun to re-evaluate their opinion of the Chorus.

CULT OF ECSTASY

The Middle Kingdom has long been home to two Ecstatic sects. The largest is the Chinese K'an Lu. These Taoist mages combine a strict regimen of martial arts, meditation, diet and tantric sex in their magical pursuits. By western Ecstatic standards, the sect could be considered reserved, but Akashics and Wu Lung have long considered them excessively hedo-

GOD'S ARMY

For the past twelve years, Myanmar (Burma) has been in a state of near continuous civil war, as the military junta has tried to enforce its rule over the country's various ethnic minorities. One of these ethnic groups is the Karen, many of whom were converted by Baptist missionaries during the 19th century. Three years ago, the Karen National Union forces were on the verge of annihilation when new hope arrived in the form of a pair of twin boys. Claiming to hear the voice of God, Johnny and Luther Htoo formed God's Army. Like a cross between the Biblical prophets and traditional Karen mystical heroes, the Htoo brothers attracted over two hundred fighters under their banner, forming them into a Christian fundamentalist guerilla army. The soldiers of God's Army believed that the boys possessed supernatural powers, including the ability to read minds and make themselves invisible. Recently, combined military actions by both the Burmese and Thai armies managed to destroy the main camp of God's Army. Johnny and Luther disappeared after the attack. As of this writing, their whereabouts are unknown.

Questions as to whether or not the Htoo brother are Awakened or if they are members of the Celestial Chorus (or any other faction) are left to individual Storytellers to answer.

nistic. The past ten years have not been kind to the K'an Lu. Government crackdowns have forced members into hiding. Many retreated to their hidden Chantries, while some fled to the Americas. More than a few Masters sought refuge in the Umbra, only to become trapped there when the Avatar Winds came. Now, the sect struggles to find its future. Many seek closer ties to the Akashics, hoping to turn old rivals into new compatriots. Others look to find allies among the shen, sending emissaries to the Hsien, the Beast Courts, and even the Wan Kuei.

The Tibetan Ka'a have fared even worse. This small, all-female sect of tantric mystics has traditionally used astral projection to visit unsuspecting males as "dream lovers," draining the men of energy (almost like a Western succubus). Now, the Avatar Storm makes such astral journeys much more dangerous. At least one trio of Ka'a Masters were lobotomized after being caught off guard by the storm. To make matters worse, since the summer of 1998 (when an accidental release of Chinese nerve gas led to the tragic deaths of three villages and a regiment of Chinese soldiers), dark entities have prowled the dreamscapes of Tibet. The remaining Ka'a are divided on their course of action. Some

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

For almost a decade, Ecstatics in the service of Marianna of Balador have scoured the globe tracking down leads in their search for a rumored Infernalist cult dedicated to rape and child abuse. Though proof of the cult remains elusive, the heinous activities they are accused of do not. And though Marianna is believed to be dead, her agents continue the fight. Informally referred to as the Children's Crusade, these mages — often members of the Cult of Ecstasy, but an increasing number of Choristers, Euthanatoi, and others — work to help abused and exploited children any way they can. Methods range from legal and public (education, public awareness, lobbying, shelters) to those of questionable ethics (kidnapping, vigilante killings). Oddly enough, the Crusade has found one ally they hadn't counted upon — the Technocratic Union. While the Union will never admit to it officially, many agents are sympathetic to the Crusade, turning a blind eye toward its activities and sometimes offering covert aid.

In the Middle Kingdom, the Crusade concentrates its energies on battling the worst excesses in cities such as Bangkok and Manila. Unfortunately, their resources have always been stretched thin. There are so few Crusaders to fight so many battles. The group continues to recruit heavily, and members hope that the new generation of Awakened, no longer forced to continue a war that was lost centuries ago, will wish to devote their youthful energy toward more productive goals.

have fled into India, seeking refuge with their fellow tantrics among the Vratyas sect. Others have traveled to the United States. Many, however, refuse to abandon their homeland.

DREAMSPEAKERS

People often look at the Dreamspeakers and see only the “big three” — the aboriginal peoples of Australia, Africa and the Americas — ignoring those from other corners of the world. Several of those corners are found in the Middle Kingdom. Groups such as the Ainu of Japan, the Mongols, the Koreans, the Hmong and Mien hill tribes of Laos, the followers of Wektu Telu in Indonesia, and tribal Filipinos produced shamans long before the Council of Nine was even conceived. However, just as the Lapp shamans of Scandinavia have been ignored by the more “civilized” European Traditions, so have Asian Dreamspeakers been ignored, marginalized and even persecuted by their fellow Chi'n Ta. Only now, as the Ascension War ends (and some say the Fifth Age with it), do Akashics and others begin making overtures of peace and even alliance with the shamans they have scorned for so long.

EUTHANATOI

Ever since the Himalayan Wars (900-300 B.C.), the Euthanatos Tradition has found itself unwelcome in the Middle Kingdom. Even after the formation of the Council of Nine, there have always been Akashics unwilling to forget the past. Rather than force the issue, most Euthanatoi have simply avoided Eastern Asia, choosing to remain in India, Africa and other more friendly regions.

Younger members of the Tradition are beginning to question the wisdom of this strategy. How long should atrocities like the Cultural Revolution and the Khmer Rouge go unpunished, if not by mundane authorities, then at least by the Golden Chalice? While members of the Madzimbahwe sect might have a sharp answer for that, a handful of idealistic young Euthanatoi have entered the Middle Kingdom seeking to apply their own brand of justice.

ORDER OF HERMITS

The Houses of Hermes have never been welcomed in the Middle Kingdom. The Wu Lung and other Chi'n Ta consider them barbarian upstarts with delusions of grandeur, and the Order's trademark arrogance does little to soothe matters. Those rare Hermetics who journeyed into Asia returned with reports of hostile paradigms and horrific manifestations of Paradox. In truth, these travelers brought such things on themselves. Out of hubris, no Hermetic willworker would lower himself to the act of registering with the Ministry of Works (for more information see Chapter Three of this book and *World of Darkness: Blood & Silk*), and thus his magic would always be vulgar within the Middle Kingdom. Few mages outside of House Tytalus dared to brave this hostile land.

Ironically, it was the Technocratic Union who cleared the way for the Order of Hermes to enter Asia. During the 19th century, members arrived as merchants, businessmen and military officers of their respective nations, setting up safe houses and Chantries in colonies such as Hong Kong, Macao, and French Indochina. Often these houses were disguised as private clubs catering to wealthy Europeans and Americans. Unfortunately, the 20th century proved most unkind to Hermetic interests in Asia. Revolution and war forced the abandonment of many chantries, and led to the destruction of others. At present, the Tokyo club remains active (although it is under Technocracy surveillance), and the clubs in Hong Kong and Macao are debating their post-handover fate. Meanwhile, younger Hermetics are working to rebuild that which was lost. One group is attempting to rebuild the abandoned Chantry in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), while another makes plans to retake a Bangkok Chantry from the Asian vampires who seized it during World War Two.

THE HOUSE OF CRIMSON THUNDER

For the past few decades, members of the Hermetic chantry in Hong Kong have worked to integrate the traditional Chinese practices of feng shui, the *I Ching*, Taoist alchemy and *tzu wei* with the Hermetic Arts of geomancy, numerology, alchemy, and astrology. In 1992, nine Asian Hermetics petitioned to be recognized under the aegis of House Ex Miscellania as House Hong Lei — the House of Crimson Thunder. Over the past eight years, Hong Lei doubled its membership, but the final turnovers of Hong Kong and Macao have forced several members to relocate to London, San Francisco, New York and Sydney. Only time will tell if this diaspora will cause the new House to wither on the vine or continue its fortuitous growth.

SONS OF ETHER

When the Meiji Restoration began, the Electrodyne Engineers were among the first waves of Technocrats to enter the country. Eager to teach their new Asian allies the wonders of Enlightened Science, the Engineers embarked upon all manner of research and experimentation (including, if stories can be believed, the building of a forty-foot-tall steam-powered robot crafted from wood and steel). While disagreements in philosophy and methodology drove the Engineers from the Technocratic Union, it couldn't drive them from Japan. Just as their German counterparts willingly used their scientific skills in service to the Third Reich, Japanese Etherites engaged in all manner of repulsive and heinous experiments throughout the so-called Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. While most of these Awakened war criminals were liquidated by either the Technocracy or by their fellow Traditionalists, more than a few are believed to have escaped into the Soviet Union, beyond the Wall or to even stranger places.

Today, the best place to find the Sons of Ether in Asia is the Academy of Advanced Technology & Progressive Science in Osaka. Founded by Prof. Bo Buro-su in 1965, the academy has become the primary recruitment and training grounds for Japanese Etherites. Here, students work on projects ranging from bleeding-edge electronic gadgets, robotics and cybernetics to cold fusion, zero point physics, and single-particle gravity-resonance units. The Japanese Technocracy has traditionally turned a blind eye toward the Academy, preferring to let the renegade technomancers do as they please and then appropriate any successful developments for themselves.

VERBENA

When the Verbena first came together as a Tradition in the 15th century, it was through the efforts of two people — Nightshade of Harrowgate and William Groth of Baerwald. After forming a core group of Celtic, Norse, German and Slavic sorcerers, the two mages each set out in opposite

directions seeking other sects to join the Verbena and the Council of Nine. Nightshade went west, eventually returning with mystics from the Americas. Groth went east, into the Middle Kingdom, and never returned. At least once a generation, various members of the Tradition strike out into Asia, hoping to retrace their founder's footsteps and perhaps learn how and why he died. Most return empty-handed. Some never return at all. Over time, this practice has become known as Groth's Pilgrimage, and those that complete the journey are respected for both their courage and for their dedication to the Tradition's past.

The most recent batch of pilgrims has added an additional goal to the voyage. These mages seek to do that which Groth could not — recruit Asian mages into the Verbena. While a small number of Korean and Chinese peasant wizards have opted to join the Tradition, success has been extremely limited. However, the recent Akashic recruitment of the Wu Lung has bolstered the pilgrim's determination, as well as given them a new plan. These young Verbena now seek nothing less than to recruit the Wu-Keng, and many are convinced that this is just what Groth was seeking to do during his journey. Thus far, the Chinese peasant women have remained elusive, but the Verbena keep searching. When asked about the persistent rumors that the Wu-Keng are Infernalists, the Pilgrims dismiss these tales as simply more of same slander European witches and pagans have endured for centuries.

VIRTUAL ADEPTS

As the youngest of the Nine Traditions, the Virtual Adepts lack much of a history with the Middle Kingdom. For the early Difference Engineers, Asia was too primitive for their Enlightened Science. Even after Japan began the Meiji Restoration, most Engineers found the militaristic society too constraining. In the past few decades, the Adepts have started to take an interest in Asia. Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore draw the most attention from the Tradition, as Adepts seek to involve themselves in the future of communications technology. Gradually, the Asian Adepts have come in contact with small local technomancer sects oriented toward bleeding-edge computer technology and even homemade cybernetics. The Virtual Adepts hope to recruit these hypertech mages — the Five Rings Gama, the Thunder Cranes Society, the Gon Lo, and others — but for now, these groups remain wary of giving up their independence.

"REAL" MAGIC?

The magical traditions of the following groups may use **Mage: The Ascension** terms, but that doesn't obligate the Storyteller to fill these groups with willworkers. At the Storyteller's whim, the groups may consist of all mages, a mixed crew of mages and magic-savvy acolytes or solely of un-Awakened sorcerers. The choice may affect the rules, but the story will still tell of magic-wielding secret societies. Though he may not bend reality to his will, a knowledgeable and prepared sorcerer is certainly a force to be reckoned with.

ASIA'S SECRET SOCIETIES

The following four magical groups are only a small (and dark) sample of the incredible variety of magical practices found in the East. Storytellers may wish to use these as guidelines for creating their own groups.

GO KAMISORI GAMA

The "ninja warrior" is a staple of Japanese and American action films.

The distinctive black costume has become cinematic shorthand for menace; everyone knows that the ninja are stealthy assassins, foes without honor and often wielders of evil mystical powers. Fortunately for the samurai of the past, this ninja caricature only existed in fiction. The Go Kamisori Gama would like to change that.

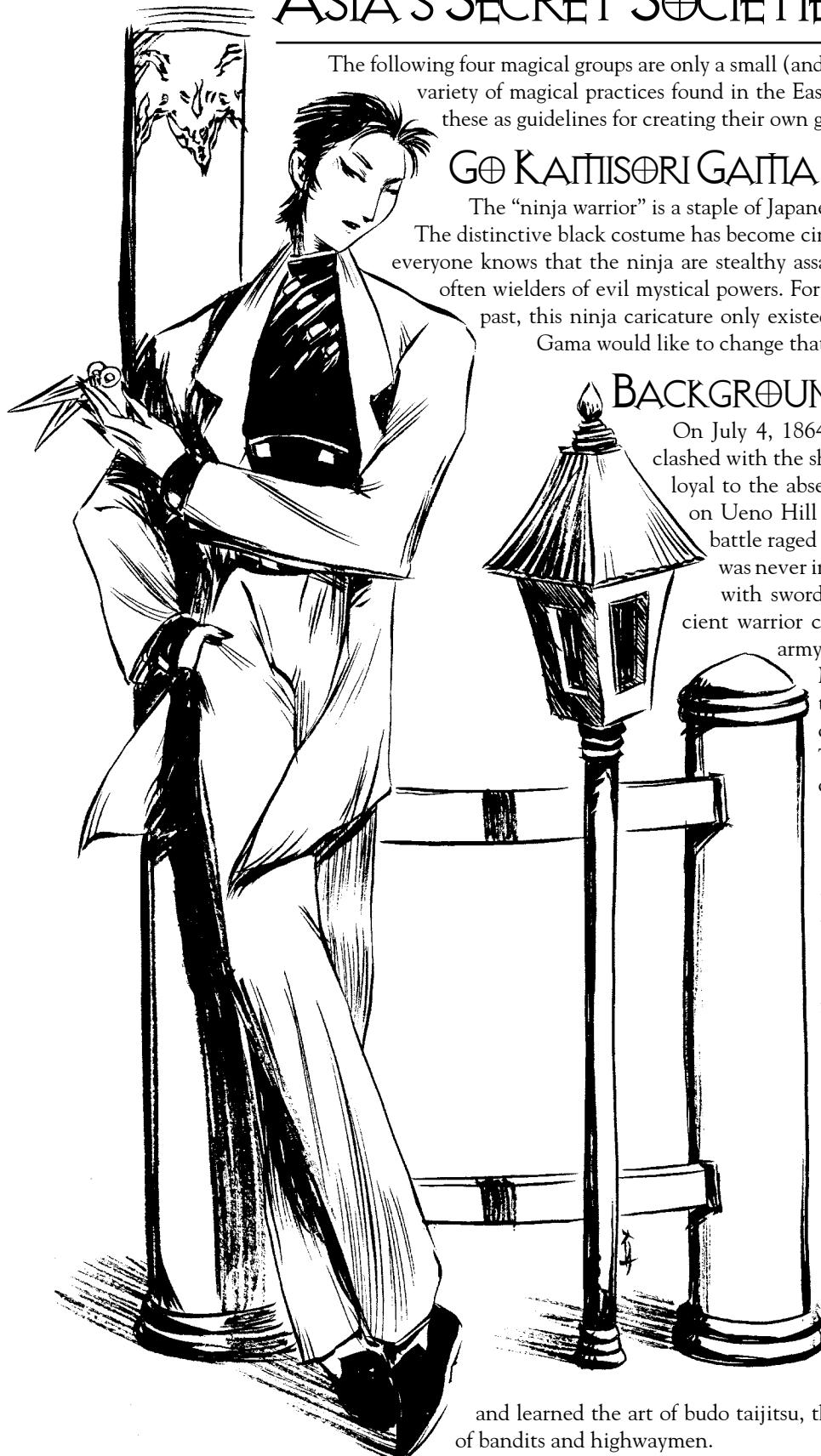
BACKGROUND

On July 4, 1864, the imperial army of Japan clashed with the shogitai, the remaining samurai loyal to the absent shogun, in a bloody battle on Ueno Hill in what is today Tokyo. The battle raged for a full day, but the outcome was never in question. The samurai fought with swords, and according to their ancient warrior code of bushido. The imperial army was equipped with firearms.

Most of the shogitai fought to the death — those that didn't committed seppuku soon after. Three of the defeated samurai chose another path.

The three samurai, from the families of Uchida, Satoh and Ishida, set aside their warrior code as irrelevant in a time when Japan's armies used guns instead of swords, and foreign traders bought access to Japanese land with the approval of the emperor. Refusing to take their own lives, they became ronin, but they consciously stepped even further from the samurai's path by choosing to operate as ninja. Though their families suffered a great loss of honor from their refusal, the families still retained their ancestral lands. With this meager support, the warriors banded together as a clan, the Go Kamisori Gama. They set aside their honorable training

and learned the art of budo taijitsu, the opportunistic fighting style of bandits and highwaymen.



They succeeded only moderately — setting aside a way of life and a lifetime of training is not a simple task. Their martial skills were sufficient to survival, however, and their children reaped the benefits of starting their training from a clean slate. Taking lessons from the history of Ueno Hill, the children, grandchildren and their descendants have made certain to combine the best of new technology with the arts of fighting and stealth. At first this simply meant obtaining and training with firearms. In the modern day, their technological arsenal includes cutting-edge cybernetics, state-of-the-art computers, fourth generation plastic explosives and sniper rifles.

The Go Kamisori Gama do not rely solely on fighting with hands and fists, with swords, or even with modern technology. There is another side to budo taijitsu, an aspect of the art that encourages mental focus and internal harmony. The practitioner's mental energies are focused through the use of hand signs, called *kuji-in*, taken from early Buddhist meditation postures. The family members learned the *kuji-in* as a matter of course in their training, but it was not until a granddaughter of the Satoh family founder unlocked the true power of the hand signs through a religious obsession of fasting and prayer that the clan realized their magical potential. They adapted their training to emphasize balance and harmony among mind, body and universe, but some warriors seem to have a knack for the *kuji-in*, while others are better off focusing on other areas of training.

The Go Kamisori Gama have taken on the title of *ninja* — it is the simplest way to describe what they do to those with sufficient funds and sufficient need for their services. Like the ninjas of the cinema, they are assassins. They are also corporate spies, security consultants, hackers, thieves and bodyguards — they can even arrange for gardening and housecleaning services with the utmost discretion, should the client be willing to pay their exorbitant finders' fee. Their clients have included government ministers and movie stars, admirals and corporations. They have even subcontracted from and worked directly for the Yakuza, a working relationship that remains on good terms.

ORGANIZATION

The members of the Go Kamisori Gama were originally all descendants of the three founding samurai. It is no longer necessary to be a blood or marriage relative to join this exclusive group — there is enough work for twice as many *ninja* as the clan currently orchestrates, so promising outside candidates are considered. It is rare for a family member not to remain in the family business; this helps assure the group's necessary veil of secrecy. It is no longer the practice to force every family member into the same stealthy warrior pigeon-hole, however; the clan has broadened its interests enough that there are opportunities for nearly any family member's interests to be indulged, whether that be flower arranging, computer architecture or marrying rich.

The status of the *ninja* as a popular culture icon provides a wonderful cover for Go Kamisori Gama recruiting practices. Most metropolitan areas have at least one ninjutsu or taijitsu dojo or club. Go Kamisori Gama *ninja* attend these classes as observers, ranging as far afield as New York or Belgium in search of trainees with a suitable flair for the art and a hunger behind the eyes. Mail order catalogs selling *ninja*-to swords and the quaint black-pajama *ninja* garb are more than happy to sell their customer lists, which can then be cross-referenced with medical histories, library loaning practices and criminal records. Individuals who stand out as odd in this search are often stalked by Go Kamisori Gama novices, killing two birds with one stone — the novice exercises his skill in the field, often in a strange land, and the prospective recruit is evaluated. The clan prefers to take in young recruits, but may make exceptions for those with other useful skills.

Experts in such unique areas as cybernetics are either bought or blackmailed — or both. A large pile of cash tends to take away some of the sting of betrayal, while the clan has the solid reassurance that blackmail provides. These expert consultants are never shown the true nature of their new moonlight employers until they are so deeply entangled in Go Kamisori Gama affairs that there is no way out. The clan loses an unfortunate number of experts to suicide.

The Go Kamisori Gama is currently incorporated as a body shop, hiring out its employees on short- and long-term contracts. The corporation refers to a *ninja* operative by the bland title of "consultant." Older clan members, or those wounded so gravely as to be unfit for field work take the comfortable chairs of vice presidents and executive vice presidents and assist with the administration of the family business.

The current "President" of the Go Kamisori Gama is Ishida Jiro, a compactly built man in his late forties with just a touch of gray at his temples. Jiro still takes part in field operations — he is still spry and keen-eyed. His position is not a graceful retirement; he is as much the uncontested leader of the clan as any samurai daimyo of old. The vice presidents deal with repeat clients, entertaining them and making sure their needs are met in the proper business fashion, but Jiro meets personally with all new prospective clients. Maintaining his clan's position and income is not a concern — there is always dirty work to be done. Maintaining the clan's veil of secrecy and security, however, is a responsibility that weighs heavily on Jiro's shoulders.

THEORIES AND PRACTICES

The martial art of budo taijitsu teaches barehanded grappling and nerve strikes in addition to the standard repertoire of punches and kicks. *Ninja* also train with swords and staves, a concession necessary to the completeness of their training. (Those interested in exploring martial arts combat in more detail should refer to *World of Darkness: Combat* for maneuvers and specializations.) The stereotypical shuriken has

largely been traded in for the sophisticated grenade, which is far more reliable at deterring pursuit. The other weapons of the ninja tradition have been mostly discarded as too unusual and too likely to draw unwanted attention.

The Go Kamisori Gama's access to cybernetics is provided courtesy of the Zaibatsu — through a program of blackmail and bribes, of course, though undoubtedly the Metal Dragons know a great deal more about the ninja clan than the assassins would be comfortable with. Typical modifications include implanted weaponry, enhanced vision, or supplementary strength or speed. The cyberware is difficult to use properly — it is never trusted in the hands of novices. (Cybernetic enhancements are detailed extensively in *Demon Hunter X*.)

The *kuji-in* hand signs used by the ninja serve as foci for a broad range of magical Effects. They are, in fact, the only foci the ninja use, as they would never risk being caught flatfooted without the necessary tools. There are a total of eighty-one symbols known to the Go Kamisori Gama. The most powerful provide the abilities to strengthen the mind and body, mask the ninja's presence, provide a fine sense of balance, heal, endure extreme environments, read others' minds, channel power through a shout or touch and provide a moment of enlightenment.

TOC FAAN

The country of Cambodia faced desperate times during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. From 1975 to 1979, the secretive Angkar ("The Organization," as the regime was known to its countrymen) pulled the strings of power from the anonymous safety of code names and pseudonyms; in the countryside, puppets followed the orders of their tugged strings and smashed the enemies of the state — hundreds of thousands of Cambodian citizens. The infamous Tuol Sleng prison, referred to by the sinister moniker S-21, housed, interrogated and executed suspected traitors; of the more than 14,000 unfortunates interred at S-21, only seven lived to tell the tale. When the smoke cleared and the Vietnamese Army claimed the capital, Phnom Penh, between one and three million Cambodian citizens — between eleven and twenty percent of the population — lay dead in the Cambodian killing fields. It was little surprise to anyone of occult learning to find the Toc Faan, notorious cannibals and Infernalists, lurking beneath Angkar's shadowy coattails.

The tale is not as simple as it seems, however. Even scholars of the strange can be lured to simple conclusions by the promise of a grisly tale of demons and wizards. The founders of the Toc Faan might have relished such a role,

WILL THE REAL NINJA PLEASE STAND UP?

Clearly, the Go Kamisori Gama owe more to the "cinematic" image of a ninja than to historical accounts that may have accounted for the ninja of the past. Players who want the stereotypical black-garbed assassin with high-tech tools won't be disappointed. On the other hand, some people relish a more gritty accuracy.

Accounts of ninja are muddled at best. Because of the heroic samurai tradition, many Japanese accounts could be considered rather biased; ninja figure as dishonorable hired killers. In truth, the legends of ninja *probably* stem from lower-class survivors who lost their livelihoods during the Civil War period of Japan, as described in Chapter One. These weren't rogues, but revolutionaries. Entire families were slaughtered and landholders dispossessed, forced to flee into the woods to eke out a peasant's existence. Driven by a fervor for revenge or just total desperation, such exiles naturally turned to their farm implements for weapons and resorted to banditry against passing samurai (who likely carried money). Some might have been desperate enough to try to assassinate local nobility. Coming from the lowest castes of society, they'd be ignored when entering most places, just as anyone of status would ignore a butcher, gravedigger or similar unclean peasant in that era. The "ninja" could enter and leave unnoticed, kill the object of his vengeance and perhaps even steal enough money to live for a while. Nobody paid attention to the useless little man of no account — clearly, the assassin was a potent warrior who could move invisibly and walk through walls!

When you're desperate and living in the woods, you make do with what you can get. Samurai have finely honed swords and keen fighting skills. Dispossessed farmers don't — so they

use the advantages they have. Fight dirty. Turn some of your tools into little metal spikes that you can throw; if they get rusty, your enemy will get tetanus and eventually die, leading to stories of terrible poisons. Use traps to hunt game for food, and if a samurai stumbles into one, kill him and sell his weapons and armor — and the legend grows about your incredible and complex traps. Learn to use cover to your advantage, sleep in trees, move around at night and perhaps pick up some martial skills along the way; when a mercenary soldier group fails to catch you, they spin exotic tales of your phenomenal hand-to-hand skills and your ability to disappear. Muddle in some old Chinese stories about the Lin Kuei (forest demons) and tales of wandering yamabushi, and suddenly you're credited with supernatural powers ascribed to eccentric hermits who lived in the woods and practiced pressure point techniques. Puppet plays start to convey you as a stealthy assassin, and the play handlers are garbed all in black so that the audience will ignore them; someone garbs the ninja puppet all in black to indicate to the audience that it, too, is invisible.

The Go Kamisori Gama rely on image, but what would the descendants of the ancient "ninja" really be doing today? Just what their predecessors did — surviving. Really, desperate revenge-seeking farmers don't have much in the way of family expectancy. Those who did raise families and clans on the run, who passed down their techniques, might have given rise to whole ninja families — or they might not. Like everything else about the shinobi, there's no truth, only smoke and mirrors. But in the World of Darkness, chances are there's at least a little truth to the stories of the shadow warriors.

but the Toc Faan of today find themselves caught in a much more complex situation.

BACKGROUND

The precursors of the Toc Faan were ninth-century priests and warriors of Devaraja cults, devoted to preserving, perhaps even granting, the divinity of the Khmer Empire's god-kings. The men held sway in the Devaraja temples and shrines, guarding the lingam which housed the god-king's divine nature, performing the careful human sacrifices that maintained its creative power, laying the deceased god-kings to rest, investing the successors with their inherited power. The women protected the god-king's physical body, training from girlhood with shield and lance to take their places in his all-female personal guard. For four centuries, the Devaraja cults practiced their bloody magic with the full endorsement of the Empire. The arrival of Hinayana Buddhism from neighboring Thailand stole away the hearts of the common people and eventually the ruler — not surprising, considering that this new Buddhism was a religion by the people and for the people, while the old system benefited only the god-king and his cultists. As the Khmer culture declined, the Devaraja cultists withdrew from society and all but vanished.

Centuries later, somewhere in the mountains or jungles of Cambodia, some or all of the inheritors of the Devaraja traditions made a fateful choice: They devoted themselves to the Yama King Malaveyovo, He of the Insatiable Maw, in exchange for magical power. Their rituals, once regal even when gruesome, were reduced to grotesque mockeries of their former splendor. The new Toc Faan devoured its victims; consuming a human liver was sufficient to appease their new god-king, but the truly faithful devoured the flesh of whole corpses. Autocannibalism was a highly regarded, if self-limiting, form of worship. The Toc Faan exercised its regained power in solitude for the most part, in the company of only their victims, until they became involved with Angkar in the 1970's. The few vivid exceptions occurred when Euthanatos or Akashic mages rooted out isolated cult cells. Tales of these lurid skirmishes earned the Toc Faan their lasting bad reputation as demon-worshipping cannibals in the eyes of mages around the world.

Behind the scenes, however, the surviving Toc Faan have long known that something is very wrong — or perhaps very right. The founders of the cult were without question, evil, self-centered people. Though they did not feel the need to take notes on the process of selling their souls, it can be surmised that the initial contact with Malaveyovo entailed the ritual slaying and devouring of countless innocents — and possibly any Devaraja priests or warriors who did not approve of the downward course. The ritual propitiation of the Yama King involved the continued, annual slaughter and consumption of humans; an individual sorcerer's need for power piled the bodies still higher. Yet in the midst of this conscious depravity, the members of the Toc Faan found themselves with qualms of conscience instead of the implacable souls of hardened killers. As matters slowly went from bad to worse — Lords of Hell do not kindly take to "no thanks, I'd rather not" in lieu of sacrifice — the sorcerers discovered that

they suffered under a curse, of sorts: every human consumed by a



Toc Faan wizard left a small piece of good karma behind in his violator's soul. This karmic accumulation continued to uplift the sorcerers' souls, until their rites were repugnant, and taking a life was an ordeal.

This development was not an intended effect of their bargain with the hells — not intended by the Toc Faan, at any rate. They were either, they suspected, tricked by Malaveyovo, who perhaps gained an even more perverse joy from their cannibalism under duress; perhaps an outside force intervened in the bargain, a force that sought to do the wizards good by improving their moral standing. Some even worried that they had become part of a grand scheme by the denizens of Yomi to damage the karmic cycle, using the Toc Faan to collect goodness — and to carry it screaming to hell with them when they died.

To this day, the Toc Faan do not know the precise origin or nature of their Infernal malfunction. They have accumulated a great storehouse of knowledge on Infernalism, demonic pacts, and the Yama Kings themselves in the process of their inquiries. There is also internal disagreement on what should be done once the true nature of the pact is uncovered. Some are devoted to freeing themselves from the karmic curse and the pact with Malaveyovo altogether, ending their need to commit atrocities. Others fear that removing the curse and the pact would return the wizards to their previous moral states, which, given their recruitment principles (see below), would return them to lives of evil and depravity; these members prefer to bear the curse and the pact with silent shame, doing as little damage to the world as possible. Still others choose not to consider options until they have discovered the cause of the karmic curse and devote themselves to this goal with considerably more fervor than they display choking down human livers. In the meantime, the gorging on human meat continues, as compelled by Malaveyovo; dead wizards, or those dragged bodily to Yomi Wan, cannot free themselves from such curses.

The Toc Faan's involvement with Angkar and the Khmer Rouge in exile is a point of puzzlement for the incredibly few sympathetic observers. Perhaps they chose to ally themselves so that they could consume Angkar's victims, rather than causing still more Cambodian deaths. Perhaps they sought to make Pol Pot a new god-king and focus for their powers, thereby cheating Malaveyovo. Perhaps the Yama King forced them into the alliance. Whatever the reason, the Toc Faan undoubtedly provided assistance and advice to Angkar in return for access to the regime's hundreds of thousands of victims. Any benefit the Toc Faan gained from this unsavory alliance was short-lived: Pol Pot's paranoid internal purges of his organization caught a number of Toc Faan in the nets. Decimated by their fickle allies, the Toc Faan retreated to the dense forests and mountains of the northwest — the same region that hides the remaining Khmer Rouge insurgents to this day.

ORGANIZATION

The Toc Faan still appoint a High Priest from among their ranks, a tradition carried over from the ancient Deva-raja practices. The High Priest has the unwelcome honor of treating with Malaveyovo's emissaries, the warped Kura Sau or accursed Kuei-jin akuma, or occasionally with the Yama King himself. Because of the intense scrutiny of this frequent demonic contact and the sensitive nature of the Toc Faan's current position, the putative High Priest is usually magically powerful but woefully uninformed. A promising initiate is whisked from the most basic ritual chants and ecstatic flesh gorging to the pinnacle of Infernally invested power without ever seeing the spiritually tense situation that occupies so much of the cult's attention.

The true knowledge and remaining untainted power of the Toc Faan rests with the small council of sorcerers who choose the High Priest. These men and women are the elders of the group — only the eldest are trusted to have accumulated both the necessary distaste for their Infernal servitude, and the mental fortitude necessary to keep the cult's secrets safe from the Yama King's spies. Ironically, many of these old ones have far exceeded normal human life spans using Malaveyovo's tainted gifts. When one of the venerable ones dies, the next oldest cultist steps up to join the council. The Khmer Rouge purges claimed several of those unnaturally extended lives; though the council has refilled its ranks, the council members are still unsure, decades later, if all its new members are worthy of trust.

The Toc Faan recruits the dregs of society to serve as acolytes. The reasons for this are entirely pragmatic: Only the deranged and sadistic have the stomach for the cult's cannibal rites, and these individuals are sorely in need of the reform that the Toc Faan curse provides. A disregard for life and a taste for human flesh are not all that a Toc Faan acolyte requires, however. Those who are too dense or too reckless often end up on the altar. Those recruits who are strong-willed and cunning are the most likely to go on to become powerful sorcerers; these students are also vicious and unpredictable, a true danger to their teachers until the curse of morality has taken hold. Even in the modern day, the cult prefers to recruit only those of Khmer ethnicity. There is, sadly, no shortage of recruits; the continuing civil strife makes life hard on Cambodia's citizens. Killing is an everyday affair. Many of the cult's current members were child prison guards at Tuol Sleng and other monuments to human atrocity.

THEORIES AND PRACTICES

The might of the Toc Faan comes from the unholy powers granted by the Yama King Malaveyovo. Commonly these manifest as Forces Effects, calling forth the scorching fire or icy cold of the hells, or Spirit Effects, corrupting and

twisting the soul. (Storytellers looking to add some true demonic flair to the Toc Faan should take a look at the Demonic Investments available to the Nephandi in *The Book of Madness*.) The Toc Faan still practice and pass on the old ways of magic: the male priests perform their rites of life and death using the spheres of Life and Entropy, while the female warriors hone their bodies and skills through the Spheres of Life and Mind.

Common foci for both priests and warriors are artifacts of the Khmer Empire, whether portable ones such as silverware or small stone sculptures, or immovable

ones like the ruins of the lingam temples of the god-kings. The priests also may use small vials of carefully collected bodily fluids as foci, while the warriors' lances and shields serve as foci for their martial endeavors. The Toc Faan's greatest focus is not available to them — the god-king. A god-king must certainly be anointed before the Toc Faan can stand up to Malaveyovo's might — if any among the Toc Faan remember how such a thing might be accomplished.

TAI HOI LI

The same era of conflict that exposed the rejuvenation of the Toc Faan to the magical community also spurred the creation of an entirely new magical group in the Cu Chi tunnels of Vietnam. Its members are few, but the group's rapid rise to significant magical power in the course of only three decades is cause for alarm to many centuries-old Traditions.

BACKGROUND

The underground tunnels that riddled the Vietnamese district of Cu Chi were dug in the early 1950s during the colony's revolt against the French government. The same tunnels were extended dramatically during the war with the

United States, eventually encompassing over 150 miles of tunnel. Tunnels undermined the main base of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, stretched 25 miles southeast to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and even penetrated the Cambodian border. The tunnels allowed the National Liberation Front (NLF, better known to Americans as the Viet Cong) to distribute supplies and weaponry and to conduct lightning-quick surprise attacks on U.S. and South Vietnamese troops — NLF snipers appeared seemingly out of nowhere to attack army patrols and disappeared with the same disturbing speed. The subterranean complex also served as a living area for NLF troops and fleeing villagers; barracks, mess halls, field hospitals, weapon factories and even a small propaganda-filled cinema could all be found through the maze of tunnels.

In January 1973, U.S. forces left Vietnam; the Second Indochina War dragged wearily on until April 1975 — the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese army. Today, Vietnam welcomes tourists, even (or especially) fat, pasty Americans with their American dollars and offers them tours of the Cu Chi tunnels. See if you can fit through this claustrophobically small passage scraped through Vietnamese dirt! (You can't.) See if you can cross this field without setting off the clever Viet Cong booby traps! (You can't.) Pay five American dollars to empty the clip of this vintage M-16! (Almost anyone can.) The horrors of war have been sanitized and packaged for tourist consumption.

Only a small fraction of the Cu Chi tunnels are open to the public. This is a good thing; something has taken up residence in the tunnels since the NLF crawled back into the sunlight, and it isn't fond of sharing space. The Tai Hoi Li, a magical group that makes its home in the subterranean warrens, is friendly enough to the few outsiders who have encountered them, but they are also unwilling to share much information about their goals and choice of home. Only morsels can be gleaned from the Tai Hoi Li.

The founder of the Tai Hoi Li is a young Vietnamese man whose name and background are not known, except that he was a poor peasant farmer in the Cu Chi district and that he had been blind since birth. Because of his disability, he had no wife and children of his own but continued to work his parents' farm. Such severe handicaps were not often tolerated in rural areas — life was hard, and blind children were often left in a city to beg rather than drain a hard-working family's resources. But these were unusual times, and the young blind man had skills that proved invaluable to his family and the other families of the village. When fighting between the French and Vietnamese forces, and later the U.S. and NLF forces, got too close, the villagers fled to the underground tunnels for safety. The young blind man's senses in the dark underground were keen. Since he had never relied on sight; his adept senses kept the villagers from stumbling into pitfalls. They avoided troops that simultaneously used the tunnels. The young man earned his keep in this way until disaster struck: The villagers were caught between U.S. tunnel rats and NLF fighters with no way to hide or reach the surface. Neither side held its attack; if they knew there were innocent bystanders in the crossfire, they didn't care. Many of the villagers were killed outright. Most of those who survived retreated with the NLF and effectively joined that day. The remaining few huddled in the dark with the young blind man, waiting for him to recover sufficiently from his injuries to lead them. He rose up and lead them — to the very deepest part of the catacombs, where they still remain.

That is all the information that the members of Tai Hoi Li willingly divulge. More troubling than their unwillingness to share more information is the inability of others to pry answers out of them — even the lowest acolyte, possessed of no significant magical ability, presents a mental barrier as smooth and cold as a sheet of glass. The group's newly exca-

vated living area, four stories below the surface, is similarly warded against any clairvoyant extensions of the senses.

The amount of raw power necessary to erect such shields leads most mages to conclude that the Tai Hoi Li have tapped an external source of power. Etherites ramble about vast subterranean caverns filled with gleaming machinery and thrumming engines. Verbena discuss the possibility that the tunnelers have dug deeply enough to reach an upswell of magma, and the Tass that often pools in the melted rock. Others obligatorily mention the possibility of demonic influence, picturing yawning shafts that end in some netherworldly hell. Only one outsider has seen the Tai Hoi Li cavern; his memories are unclear due to the necessary speed of his escape, but the images in his mind confirm that the Tai Hoi Li are still digging ever deeper into the earth.

ORGANIZATION

The Tai Hoi Li has no known formal organization. The group remains together in a single location, so the standardization of titles and official channels of communication are hardly necessary. Tai Hoi Li members are only found outside the tunnels when coming to the surface for food or other supplies; these pale quartermasters make full use of the extent of the tunnels, purchasing supplies in cities and towns throughout the district so as not to attract undue attention.

The young blind man who led the villagers into the tunnels is still the leader of the group; he is the object of veneration, according to information given by Tai Hoi Li members on procurement runs. The young man is now referred to as "Tai Hoi," meaning "to return." The title has caused a great deal of speculation. Does Tai Hoi feel that he died in the violent encounter with warring troops in the tunnels, and his name signifies a return to life? Does he feel that he is a god or spirit reborn in human form? Or is his name, perhaps, a prophecy of the return of some other great entity, for which Tai Hoi is preparing the way as a dutiful subterranean John the Baptist? It is, of course, possible that Tai Hoi did actually die in the conflict, and has returned in one of a number of ways to the Middle Kingdom. If true, this makes the Tai Hoi Li's command of magic even more mystifying and disturbing. The most thought is devoted to the third option, that the Tai Hoi Li are paving the way for the return of some magical being. The notion that the group is digging free some ancient creature locked deep in the bowels of the earth is enough to send some observers scurrying for their libraries, and others to double the watch on this secretive group. Neither approach has yet yielded results.

The membership of the Tai Hoi Li seems to be diverse, from what can be told by watching those that come up out of the ground, and exploring the caverns near the surface where the Tai Hoi Li are not quite as secretive. Most of the members are Vietnamese, but some are Khmer, Thai or Hmong. American and European tourists and journalists occasionally disappear in the Cu Chi tunnels; at least one of

the missing journalists has since been spotted in the tunnels, in the company of Tai Hoi Li members.

Most members of the group appear to be completely normal, if pale from their lack of sun. Some members, however, have adopted the practice of gouging out their eyes in order to better emulate their leader Tai Hoi. The terrible scars and gaping sockets left behind testify that this gruesome procedure is done by hand, very likely by the follower himself, without the benefit of anesthetics or antibiotics. These self-mutilated members of the group do not come to the surface, but they may be found nearly any place within the vast tunnel system.

The Tai Hoi Li have been underground for almost thirty years. It should come as no surprise that some of the members have found room in their hearts for each other, in addition to their devotion to Tai Hoi and his mysterious cause. This simple tableau of humanity in the dismal tunnels should be enlightening and reassuring—but it's not. The children born to these subterranean couples are often white in both skin and hair color, and often also bear grotesque deformities. Almost all of these pale children are blind—some have sightless but well-formed eyes while others have only white skin stretched where eye sockets should be. These children, even when grown, do not leave the tunnels for the surface either. They too may be found creeping silently through any part of the tunnel system, but the youngest are apparently kept safely in the depths of the Tai Hoi Li dwellings.

THEORIES AND PRACTICES

That the Tai Hoi Li have access to great magic is apparent. Less clear is whether the members are mages or sorcerers possessed of their own power or are simply a channel for another's power. The group's powerful ward or other protection against scrying in their lowest tunnels indicates a great deal of expertise in what the Traditions consider the Correspondence Sphere of magic. This is perhaps to be expected, given Tai Hoi's personal situation; some observers believe that Tai Hoi may have been an Awakened Orphan before the tragic incident in the tunnels. The powerful shielding of the members' minds also suggests a facility with the Mind Sphere.

The tunnel-dwellers often have very little in the way of belongings or clothing, so what little they do carry might possibly be foci. Some members make a point of carrying the discarded bits of the war. Some have large collections of dog tags, others necklaces of spent shells. Collections of eyeglasses, wedding rings and rank insignia from the French, South Vietnamese or U.S. forces have also been spotted. The devout Tai Hoi Li members who have removed their own eyes often carry the dried husks of their eyes with them in a small pouch.

Tai Hoi Li usually exhibit magical proficiency (unsurprisingly) in Correspondence, Entropy and Mind magic. Some

Tai Hoi Li clutch at their remnants of war and use these to garner a "sense" of their position; a few witnesses have heard Tai Hoi Li mutter in subdued, sibilant whispers while doing so, perhaps to invoke some sort of intervention.

PLAYING THE TAI HOI LI

Given the mystery that surrounds the Tai Hoi Li cult, and the rather specific mutilations and conditions that they face, the Tai Hoi Li don't exactly make for the best character types. They can be formidable antagonists or just a good conundrum for the players. With a little tweaking, a Tai Hoi Li can make an appearance. The player had best be prepared for some demanding roleplaying!

What, exactly, the Tai Hoi Li are doing down in their tunnels remains up to the Storyteller. Thus, a character's motives will be more heavily influenced by the Storyteller's demands than usual. On the flip side, any community needs support somehow—where do they get food? How do they ventilate the tunnels? What do they do to trade with outsiders, get weapons, clothes, information? Do they even care? What about Tai Hoi Li who have distant relatives or friends outside? Does anyone ever leave the cult, and if so, do people come after them? Any of these can motivate a Tai Hoi Li to leave the tunnels and go back to the surface, perhaps to meet other mages.

Most importantly, though, remember not to portray the Tai Hoi Li simply as caricatures. Vietnamese mages can take forms other than blind tunnel-crawlers, and conversely the Tai Hoi Li, despite their decidedly cult predilections, can still have personal motives.

SONS OF TENGRI

In the days of the Song dynasty, eight hundred years ago, the mention of the Mongol tribe was sufficient to set imperial lips trembling. The Mongol armies under Genghis Khan were the greatest the world had ever seen. Indeed, under Genghis' grandson Kublai Khan, the Mongols took down the Song dynasty, replacing it with their own Yuan dynasty. Awakened shamans were no rarity in these days, and Genghis Khan was a faithful follower of Mongol animistic beliefs, though no willworker himself.

Such greatness could not last; the subjugated peoples of China rose up against their oppressors only a century after Kublai's conquest, and the Yuan dynasty gave way to the Ming. Centuries later, the Manchus of the Qing dynasty gained the loyalty of the nobility of the Khalkha Mongols. It was around this time that Buddhism became so widely accepted on the steppe that traditional Mongolian shamanic practices began to disappear. Mongolia became a semi-autonomous client state of China, a condition that continued until the 20th century.

As Russia and China — Mongolia's strong neighbors — became communist, so did Mongolia; traditional religious beliefs, from shamanism to Buddhism, went underground. The Sons of Tengri, a small shamanistic group, became the only real Awakened inheritors of the Mongolian animist tradition, and they found themselves pursued ruthlessly by Technocratic forces of both East and West. They are somewhat unique in that they are one of the only minor traditions to face danger from both the Zaibatsu in China and the Technocratic Union in Russia; those few observers familiar with the Sons of Tengri do not believe the group can survive much longer. On the other hand, not many observers expected them to last this long, either, and the Sons of Tengri think they have an ace in the hole.

BACKGROUND

Until the influx of Buddhist thought to Mongolia in the sixteenth century, the Sons of Tengri were at best an informal organization; they did not call themselves the Sons of Tengri back then. They were simply the Awakened shamans of Mongolia; some of them even recognized that they were separate from the other shamans.

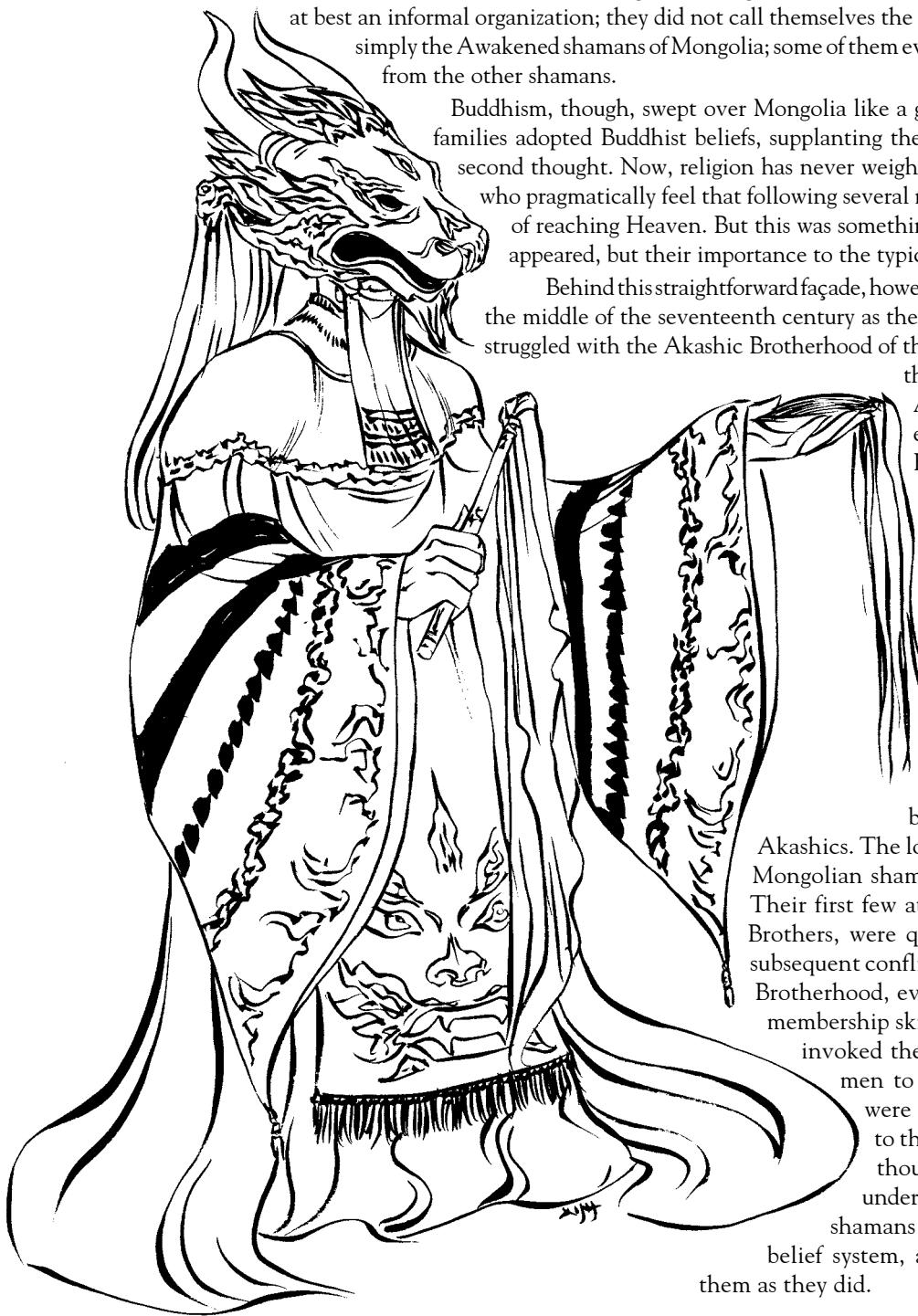
Buddhism, though, swept over Mongolia like a great wave out of China. Camps and families adopted Buddhist beliefs, supplanting their traditional animism with barely a second thought. Now, religion has never weighed down on the people of Mongolia, who pragmatically feel that following several religions only increases one's chances of reaching Heaven. But this was something else. The old ways never truly disappeared, but their importance to the typical Mongol faded.

Behind this straightforward façade, however, a metaphysical conflict raged until the middle of the seventeenth century as the peaceable old shamans of the steppe struggled with the Akashic Brotherhood of the south over the hearts and minds of

the people of Mongolia. Though the Akashic Brotherhood has never wholly embraced just one Sleeper religion, Buddhism has been one of its greatest influences, and many Akashic Brothers traveled north along with Buddhism. The Akashics were not missionaries, traveling into the far north to carry the word of Buddha to the barbarians; they simply traveled onto the steppe when Buddhist thought became popular there.

However, the conversion of many shamans to Buddhism created a clear point of contention between Mongolian shamans and Akashics. The loss of one too many Disciples led the Mongolian shamans to strike at the masters of Do.

Their first few attacks, against largely unsuspecting Brothers, were quite successful. Unfortunately, the subsequent conflict did not go their way; the Akashic Brotherhood, even in those days, was large, and its membership skilled in combat. The Sons of Tengri invoked the spirits of nature and the ghosts of men to defend them, but in the end they were overwhelmed, and ceded the field to the Akashic Brotherhood. Even then, though, the Sons of Tengri simply went underground rather than dissolving. Young shamans continued to Awaken into the Sons' belief system, and the Sons adopted and trained them as they did.



The next few centuries were relatively uneventful; occasionally the Sons came into conflict with the shapechangers of the Siberian forest or with half-mad, starved monsters from the Gobi. But the Mongols' way of life remained predictable, and the Sons of Tengri quietly rode with their Sleeper charges; they remained unnoticed by both the Akashic Brotherhood and the Eastern Technocracy.

This state of affairs lasted until the early days of the 20th century, when in quick succession the Qing Dynasty fell and Russia became communist. Mongolia joined the burgeoning communist movement in 1924, and the Technocratic Union used the near totalitarian nature of the new "socialist" states to bring the Traditions to their knees. Many Technocratic "experiments" took place in Mongolia during the 20th century; the state is barren enough that failed social or biological experiments did not endanger society as a whole. The first step to these experiments was to utterly eradicate any native mages, as their presence served as a confounding variable.

The Sons of Tengri were deeply wounded by this tactic; their population had been dwindling for centuries, and they had to hide to have a chance of surviving. In 1982, a Technocratic strike force hit most of the elders of the Craft, at a meeting in Altay; the younger members of the group continue to mourn their loss. Eighteen years later, however, the worst of the pogrom is over, and the Sons of Tengri might be able to come out from their long exile. They are suspicious of the Council of Nine, owing to tales of their conflict with the Akashic Brotherhood, and for the time being they remain carefully neutral in the conflict between Technocracy and Traditions.

ORGANIZATION

The last ten years have been relatively good to the Sons of Tengri. The expansion of democracy in Mongolia — something they happily take credit for, despite such a claim's obvious flaws — has reduced the intensity of the Technocratic hunt that they flee. For the most part, however, the Sons are still organized along conspiratorial lines, as they have been since the communist takeover in 1924.

A given cell of the Sons of Tengri consists of between three and six members, all of whom live relatively close to one another — within a hundred or so miles, at least. Individual members take whatever roles suit their fancy, or work together to a coordinated end — there are between ten and twenty cells altogether, and no two are identical. However, cell members do watch out for one another. One or two members of any given cell know the name of a contact in another cell, and these shamans pass messages across the entire Craft without risking the dangers of a centralized structure. Typically, trusted spirits are used to deliver these messages, but physical means are also used.

It is strictly forbidden for two or more Master Sons of Tengri to occupy the same building at the same time. This stricture lapsed in the early 1980s, and that lapse led to the

deaths of several Masters in the Altay Massacre. Now, almost twenty years later, with the opening of Mongolian society, many younger Sons (and Daughters — the Mongolian Craft is egalitarian with regard to sex) push to change the Craft's organization to something less paranoid.

THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Mongolian shamans venerate the god Tengri — literally "Heaven," he who is the god of the sky above — as well as the goddess Itugen, the Earth Mother. They share a rapport with the spirits of nature, especially those in particularly high places, and those of running water. By convention, no object or place is without its own natural spirit, but in these stark, mechanized days, the spirits of many locations have been crushed or hollowed out.

The Sons of Tengri also traditionally commune with the spirits of the dead; in the early days of the Mongolian Empire the afterlife was a crowded and busy place, and ghosts kept shamans busy day and night. In the modern World of Darkness, though, the ghosts of Mongolia are far more reticent, speaking of enslavement and great storms in the Underworld.

Unlike the Dreamspeaker Tradition, the Sons of Tengri do not have personal totem spirits; they do not typically associate themselves with a particular creature or spirit. Instead, their greatest concern is a group of people or a patch of land. The Sons of Tengri tend to their flocks' wellbeing, both spiritual and physical, just as they tend to the land on which they live, to appease the spirits that inhabit all living things. The Craft venerates to the spirits of running water; a communist collective that ignored the water's good health might find itself on the receiving end of a sophisticated and subtle curse.

The Sons of Tengri alone know of numerous dormant Nodes on the high steppe. At least a dozen of these patches of magical energy sit, quiescent, untapped and unused. Any mage with a modicum of familiarity with the Prime Sphere might be able to detect these nodes if she passed over them, but the modern Sons of Tengri are at a loss as to who sealed them and for what purpose. Surely the Five Metal Dragons would have opened and tapped them if the Technocracy knew of the Nodes' existence.

The Sons are sure that in the distant past their predecessors must have known the nature and origin of these Nodes. Unfortunately, the pogrom was so intense in the relatively recent past (during the era of communist rule in Mongolia) that the old masters must have passed such secrets along only verbally, and the great massacre at Altay in 1982 killed those masters before they could pass such things along. The remaining Sons of Tengri tread very cautiously these days.

The Sons also endeavor to find the nature of recent changes to the Gauntlet; though they have never been the sort to cross the Gauntlet without a good reason, the spirit world occasionally provided hard-pressed cells with needed respite. While the Sons of Tengri, like most mages, can still

traverse the Gauntlet (which they call the Wall) in a pinch, the grievous wounds typically suffered while going to the spirit world are to be avoided rather than embraced.

The crumbling of Soviet control allowed the Mongolian people to try to rediscover their heritage. City-dwellers whose ancestors had been forcibly shipped to urban centers to live in dank, concrete housing projects were free to leave the cities. Nomadic camps could pack up and move without worrying about the proper paperwork and travel passes. And, most importantly to the Sons of Tengri, the people were encouraged to study their history and culture, and to reclaim their national heroes. Foremost among these heroes is, of course, Genghis Khan. Images of the Great Khan adorn postage stamps, official currency, public squares and private homes. Scholarly works reconstructing his life are popular reading material — or listening material for the illiterate. The Sons

of Tengri move within this surge of national fervor, reaching out to the young people of Mongolia, fanning the spark of pride and inviting these youths to learn more about their heritage. It is on these energetic new recruits and supporters that the Sons of Tengri hang their hopes for a magical rebirth.

Like many shamanistic mages, the Sons of Tengri utilize the Sphere of Spirit more than any other. Common foci include a few places, in addition to particular items: the bank of a running river or stream is the site of many rituals, and spirits including Tengri himself are invoked from high promontories. The “ger” (a traditional wood-and-felt hut, also called a “yurt”) is considered a sacred space, and many rituals take place within it. The fire of a ger has its own spirit, and fire is an important focus as well. Drumming and chanting accompany most magics, and physical talismans such as bones or herbs are also important tools.

CHI'N TA AND THE SHEN



Mages are not the only supernatural beings to walk the Middle Kingdom. As in the West, creatures hide in the shadows of human society. Known collectively as shen, the supernatural creatures of Asia do not share their gweilo counterparts’ unconstrained hostility for one another. The shen have learned over the centuries to exist in some rough approximation of peace. Outsiders might even make the assumption that Asia’s various supernatural

beings live in some sort of enlightened harmony. Perhaps, in comparison to the West’s seemingly endless violent conflicts, this might even be considered true. But in fact, the Middle Kingdom is in a state of supernatural cold war. All that keeps the shen from each other’s throats is a thin veneer of politeness, reinforced by the idea that civilized beings must make war upon each other in a civilized manner. But as the Sixth Age draws closer, these platitudes sound ever more hollow. Some believe that it’s only a matter of time before the Middle Kingdom explodes in an orgy of supernatural violence and bloodshed.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Because the shen are forced to deal with each other in diplomatic situations, Asian supernaturals tend to know a little bit more about each other than their Western counterparts. While such subtleties as Dharmas and Auspices are completely lost on all but the most obsessive scholars, most experienced Chi’n Ta are at least able to refer to other groups by the titles they prefer. Because of this, most shen are referred to by the names they use for themselves, with some regional variations — such as the Chinese term “Xiong Ren” for shapechangers.

THIS IS NOT THE LEGION OF SUPERITIÖNSTERS

As a result of trying to pretend that they can live peacefully together, the shen of the Middle Kingdom have slightly more contact with one another than their Western counterparts. It’s not unheard off for a mage to find herself attached to a Kuei-jin dragon nest or a hengeyokai Beast Court as a diplomat, or vice versa. However, this does not mean that the shen diplomat has complete run of the hosts’ stronghold. A mage diplomat who wanders uninvited into the private chambers of a Kuei-jin Ancestor or into the heart of a Beast Court caern (and there are some places where a mage will never be invited) will be lucky if he’s only expelled from the area. Wu Lung still tell their students the story of Li Fong, a diplomat to the Wan Kuei who spent two hundred and six nights being filleted alive before his soul was devoured and his remains were returned to the Dragon Wizards.

In addition to diplomacy, mages may — in instances so rare that many believe it to be only a myth — find themselves as counted as associates of a hengeyokai wave sentai or (even more rare) a temporary Kuei-jin wu. Such a group is formed only out of dire necessity and rapidly breaks apart once the task that required its formation is complete. Even in the course of completing such a task, mages are not allowed to roam freely through the other shen’s places of power. Shen recognize that, at times, the will of Heaven requires such groups to form. This does not make them any happier to see such a thing occur.

WAN KUEI

Mages and the Wan Kuei have long had an antagonistic relationship at best. Wise mages recognize that Wan Kuei are ruthless, cunning, and dangerous—what else does one expect from a creature who fought his way out of the Thousand Hells? The Wan Kuei, in turn, find Chi'n Ta frustrating to no end. Mages gain in decades the power and enlightenment for which the vampires spend centuries striving. Each group's legendary arrogance only aggravates the situation. Thus, the two forces often go out of their way to avoid each other. When Chi'n Ta and Wan Kuei must interact, it is most often through the deadly and treacherous dance of diplomacy. Traditionally, many of the Middle Kingdom's larger Chantries had at least one elder member experienced in dealing with the Wan Kuei. The Avatar Storm has now thrust this duty upon younger Chi'n Ta. Only time will tell if they can rise to the challenge.

Less often, mages choose to take a more martial tact when dealing with Wan Kuei. The Akashic Brotherhood's Vajrapani sect in particular is known for producing its fair share of demon-hunters. However, when pushed, the Wan Kuei are more than willing to push back. Would-be demon hunters tend to die young and leave a messy corpse—if they leave a corpse at all. Those who live to an advanced age are very dangerous men and women indeed.

For more information on the Wan Kuei (or, as they call themselves in this Age, the Kuei-jin), see *Kindred of the East*.

CHINA (THE WAN KUEI OF THE FIVE AUGUST COURTS)

The Wu Lung believe that even the Wan Kuei have their place within the Celestial Bureaucracy (although just what that place is has long been a subject of debate). Traditional animosity between Kuei-jin and Chi'n Ta lead to fierce rivalry within China's imperial court. Here, Wu Lung and Wan Kuei played out lethal games of intrigue spanning the course of decades and even centuries. Some Wu Lung believe that the rise of Communism and their exile from mainland China was simply one more elaborate plot by the Wan Kuei. While other Wu Lung dismiss this as the talk of hubris and even paranoia, the fact remains that during the 1940s and 1950s, Wan Kuei in Hong Kong and Taiwan were willing to offer temporary sanctuary to various Dragon Wizards in exchange for favors to be named later.

Protocol concerning this particular breed of reality deviant is simple: observe, but do not engage. These creatures are capable of policing themselves when it comes to preventing their discovery by the Masses and are not actively hostile toward Union agents or interests unless provoked. Our goal here is merely to track and monitor. We prefer to devote our martial resources toward the elimination of more pressing threats. If and when these subjects do prove a threat, we know who they are and where they reside.

—Zou Min-luong, New World Order Watcher and agent of the Ministry of Public Security

We may wish otherwise, but the fact remains that the Middle Kingdom does not exist in a vacuum. There is a world outside of China, and it influences us just as we influence it. The Dragon Wizards buried their heads in the sand, hoping that if ignored, the gweilo would simply go away. Now the once mighty Wu Lung are laid low, thrown into the ash heap of history.

—Bi Dou-wan, mandarin of the Flesh Court of Shanghai

THE GREAT LEAP OUTWARD

For the past few years, the Chinese Kuei-jin have actively worked to increase their sphere of influence to include areas outside of the Middle Kingdom. This influence comes at the direct expense of their Western vampire counterparts, usually leading to bloody conflict. Thus far, the project has met with mixed results. The war in Los Angeles appears to have reached a stalemate. Attacks on San Diego were driven back, and an attempted probe into Mexico ended in total disaster. A recent attempt to expand into India has suffered due to a gross underestimation of the number of Western vampires still living there. South America seems to be the Great Leap Outward's only real success story.

For the most part, Chi'n Ta remain apart from this Kuei-jin undertaking. Most Asian mages who are even aware of the Leap are of the opinion that the Chinese vampires should set their own house in order before setting out on adventures of foreign conquest. Others take a more active interest. The Asian Technocracy gladly shares any information it has on vampires with its American counterparts, and although the Union typically places a low priority on vampires, an all-out supernatural race war would likely attract their attention. A few Akashics have chosen to follow Wan Kuei into the West, often to settle personal scores with the Chinese vampires. It is the Wu Lung who have been most directly affected. Some Dragon Wizards still owe favors to individual Wan Kuei for helping them escape from China fifty years ago. Thus, some Wu Lung now find themselves forced to help smuggle Kuei-jin into their cities or offer shelter to Wan Kuei glory-seekers.

JAPAN (THE GAKI)

Japan's Kuei-jin population divide themselves into extended clans known as *uji*. Since the Meiji Restoration, two *uji* have dominated gaki politics—the traditionalist Bishamon and the modernist Genji, though other *uji* survive and mages still find the interplay between the families confusing. Originally, Tradition mages in Japan tended to favor the Bishamon when it came to their dealings with the gaki, but the continuing evolution of Chi'n Ta sects and the realities of modern Japanese life have lead to changes. The modern mage deals with whichever gaki suits his purposes, be it a Bishamon temple priest or a Genji medical research scientist.

The Genji uji appears to have an unspoken agreement with the Zaibatsu; at the very least, the two groups do not bother one another, unless direct confrontational circumstances make that impossible. Japanese shen who know of such things are also known to make a pastime out of idle speculation as to what, if any, relationship there may be between Go Kamisori Gama and the Iga and Koga uji. Members of these so-called "ninja clans" just nod and smile when someone is rude enough to bluntly ask about such things.

When I first began my studies into the entities referred to in traditional folk lore as "gaki," I originally believed them to be suffering from a blood-born disease similar to that which creates the Occidental vampyre. However, this hypothesis proved false when it was discovered that these creatures do not infect others via their bite. I now believe that the subjects are in fact corpses that have been inhabited and then reanimated by extradimensional beings. These beings appear able to channel subdimensional energy of both the positive and the negative varieties, allowing them to produce an impressive number of effects, both offensive and defensive in nature.

—Professor Bo Buro-su, founder of the Academy of Advanced Technology & Progressive Science, from part two of his *Paradigma* series, "Asian Superstition Exposed to the Bright Light of Science!" (Vol. 68, No. 4)

When I was a boy, my grandfather told me fantastic stories. Stories of beast men and demons and powerful sorcerers who kept the power of lightning at their fingertips and brought statues to life to be their servants. As I grew older, I dismissed these things as simple fairy tales meant to entertain a young boy. More the fool was I. Beast men are real. Demons are real. And sorcerers are real. Oh, you wouldn't recognize one at first glance. They are much too smart for that. Like us, they adapt and grow with the turning of the years. Now the lightning they command moves through computers and phone lines. Animated stone statues have become robots. Tradition and respect for the past; these are good things. But they are not the only things. Those that remain stuck in the past are doomed to become nothing more than dusty

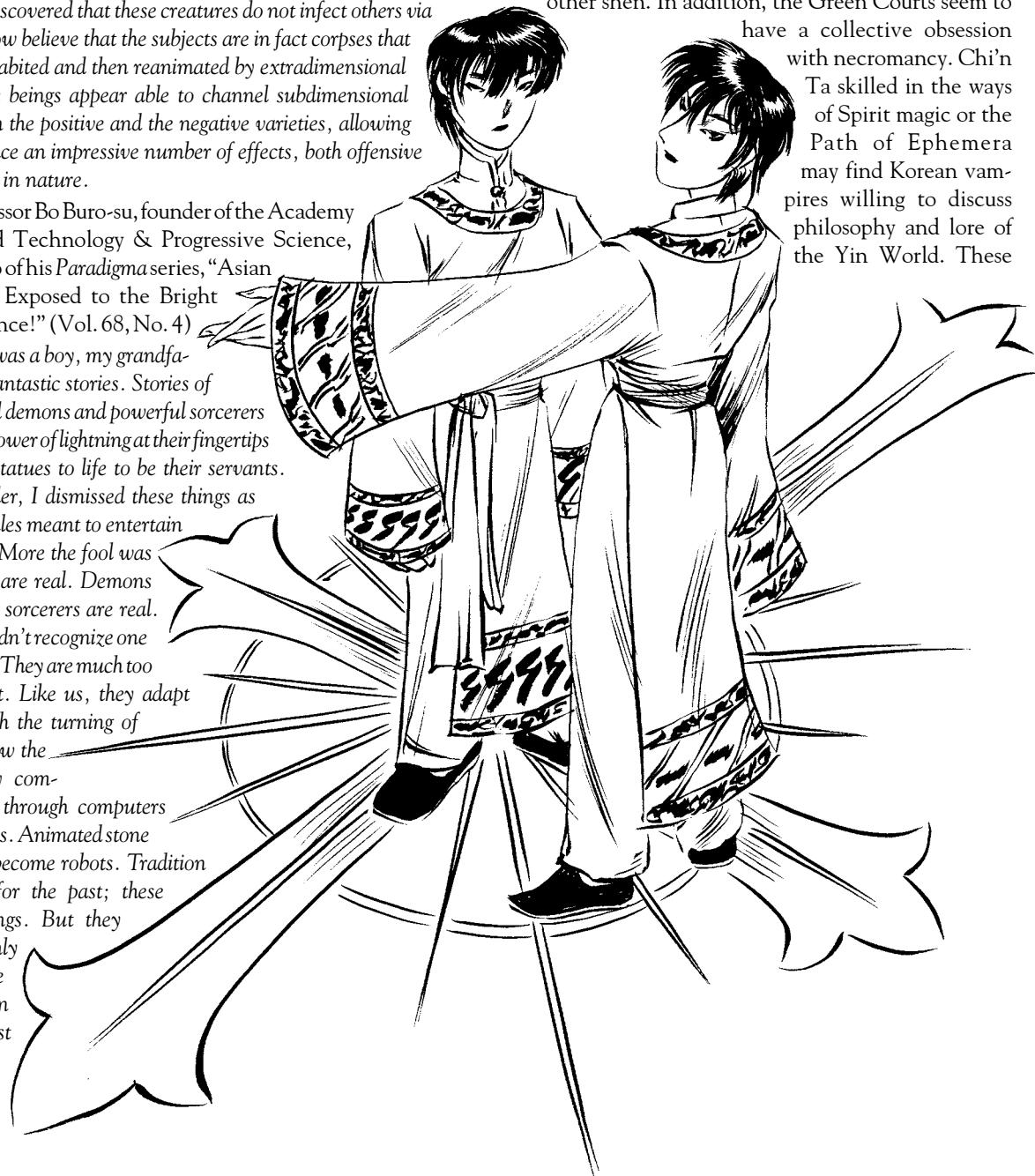
relics sitting on a museum shelf. The Chi'n Ta have learned this lesson. And so have we.

—Johnny Ninefingers, Yakuza enforcer of the Genji uji

KOREA

Korea has long been a crossroads between China and Japan, and its native undead have been caught between the rock that is the Wan Kuei and the hard place that is gaki. Under such circumstances, Korea's vampires have become some of the Middle Kingdom's premier negotiators. Not only do the Green Courts help resolve disputes between the inhabitants of neighboring states, they are the ones most likely to help arbitrate disputes between the Kuei-jin and other shen. In addition, the Green Courts seem to

have a collective obsession with necromancy. Chi'n Ta skilled in the ways of Spirit magic or the Path of Ephemera may find Korean vampires willing to discuss philosophy and lore of the Yin World. These



characteristics make the Green Courts perhaps the most interesting to mages — these undead share magical talents with a willingness to discourse. A Chi'n Ta who takes such predilections for openness or friendliness, though, makes a grave and possibly fatal error.

The son must always respect the father, and the young must always respect the old. Always remember that when dealing with the necromancers. Having been dead themselves, they have a unique insight into the ways of the ancestor spirits, and they will not stand idly by if you show less than proper respect. And those who have walked the Road Back will demand respect from you, as well. They are immortal, and grow very, very old, while you, boy, are still very, very young.

— Chol Woo-Keun, Dreamspeaker shaman

One should always show proper respect when conversing with the spirits of the ancestors. Sometimes Chi'n Ta forget this. Filled with pride and arrogance by their powers, they insult the honored ancestors, forcing the spirits to do the sorcerer's bidding. As the Sixth Age draws closer, more and more ancestors come to us with tales of disreputable necromancers who bully the spirits of the dead with their magics. As is our role under Heaven, we teach these sorcerer thugs the ways of respect and punish them for their vile crimes.

— Youn Choon-yei, Most Honored Receiver of Petitions Concerning Ancestral Grievances, and mandarin of the Court of Pusan

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Chinese mages often follow the lead of the Wan Kuei and dismiss the Kuei-jin of Southeast Asia as uncivilized barbarians, lumping the entire region into the so-called Golden Courts. In truth, the region contains over a half dozen minor courts, each with its own customs and beliefs. The wise mage always remembers that the ways of the female-dominated Malaysian penangallan are not the same as the more male-dominated kephn of Burma, the Golden Lions of Singapore, the Bangladeshi rakshasas or the even stranger denizens of Thailand or the Philippines.

Such savage beasts cast in human form. There is a dark beauty in their cruel brutality. I had one as a pet once. She was such a dutiful watchdog. A pity that so many of them deny the demon they have become.

— Hei Yugou, Nephandus leader of the Black Demon Tong and one of Southeast Asia's leading drug lords

Bah! The only Chi'n Ta here are demon worshipers and cannibals. Best to just kill them all.

— Sutshakan, Twice-Crimson Tiger of the Black Iron Talons

HENGHEYOKAI

Also known as the Xiong Ren (Ferocious People) in China.

Throughout the World of Darkness, mages and shape-shifters have always had a guarded relationship at best. The Middle Kingdom is no exception. In the eyes of the heng-

THE HALF-DAMNED

On extremely rare occasions, Kuei-jin are reputed to sire children. These creatures — half dead, half alive — are called dhampyrs. Almost always found in service to a Kuei-jin master, dhampyrs sometimes act as intermediaries and ambassadors between Kuei-jin courts and other shen. In times past, it was not unheard of for Chi'n Ta to take on a renegade or outcast dhampyr as a servant or bodyguard.

THE OBLIGATORY CROSSOVER QUESTION

No, dhampyrs cannot learn Sphere magic. The half-dead nature of their souls makes such a thing impossible.

For more information see **Half-Damned: Dhampyrs for Kindred of the East**.

eyokai, Chi'n Ta long ago stole that which is not rightfully theirs — the names of Heaven. A Namebreaker who uses these names for his own personal gain and garners the wrath of the Emerald Mother — that is, performs vulgar magic and gains Paradox — is seen as an arrogant fool at best and a dangerous madman at worst.

This is not to say that all Chi'n Ta are irredeemable. One who shows proper respect to the ways of Heaven, be it by using the alchemy of the Tao, the proper appeasement of the spirits or other traditional Middle Kingdom paradigms, is seen as a sensible fellow and perhaps even a potential ally.

For more information, see **Hengeyokai: Shapeshifters of the East** and **A World of Rage for Werewolf: The Apocalypse**.

LANGREN (WOLF PEOPLE)

Also known as Ookami Senshi (wolf soldiers).

The wolf men of Asia are a diverse lot. Equally at home within the Yang World and the material world, they are some of the Beast Courts' most lethal warriors and talented mystics. Chi'n Ta have identified at least three different groupings of these creatures in the Middle Kingdom.

- **The Hakken** — Divided into several extended clans, these Japanese (and sometimes Korean) werewolves follow the ways of the samurai and all which that entails — martial skill, political intrigue, cutthroat corporate maneuvering and total ruthlessness when dealing with their enemies. The Hakken take a pragmatic view toward Chi'n Ta. Mages fall into one of two categories: A useful tool or a dangerous enemy. Both may be respected for their skill and ability, but even the most loyal of tools can never be fully trusted.

- **The Gonren** — Wu Lung have long used this derogatory term — “dog people” — to refer to werewolf bandits and would-be peasant folk-heroes who have continuously made a

nuisance of themselves since the Fourth Age. They are often found leading rural bandit gangs or urban tongs, but over the years, more and more have found their way into Hong Kong's corporate culture. A few have even become diehard supporters of communism. In general, these bandits ignore the Chi'n Ta, with the exception of the Wu Lung, whom they seem to take a delight in harassing.

• **The Xingguan** — The Akashic Brotherhood has had the longest association with this collection of Tibetan wolf-monks. While the two groups are not allies, they have found enough in common that philosophical discussions often prove enjoyable and sometimes even productive. Sadly, the end of the Fifth Age has not been kind to the Xingguan. The Shigalu Monastery in Tibet, long the heart of this sect, has been destroyed, and many shen wonder if the Xingguan's days are numbered.

We have enjoyed a long and mutually beneficial association with the Xingguan. We have learned from their vast knowledge of the Yang Realm, and they have benefited from our teachings, allowing them to come closer to true enlightenment than any of their fellow Xiong Ren. Sadly, I fear that the loss of their ancient monastery has been too great a blow for them to recover. Even now, Xingguan begin to fall away from the path of enlightenment. Some even appear to blame us for their recent hardship.

— Buandelgeree, Jnani shaman of the Akashic Brotherhood

There are those in our clan gifted with the talent for learning sorcery, or even more rarely, ones who gain knowledge of the Names of Heaven. Inevitably, other Chi'n Ta will try to draft our gifted few into their own webs of intrigue. The clanmate must make a choice — stand loyally with her family or shamefully stand with the Namebreakers. Those who turn their backs on filial responsibility become outcasts, and are never welcomed within the clan again.

— Arashikage Tomiichi, Hakken mikagetsu (No-Moon) and corporate "troubleshooter" for Arashikage Consumer Products

KHAN

Also known as Tora-no-Kodomo (Children of the Tiger) and Huren (Tiger People).

The hearts of the Tiger-Children burn with the twin flames of honor and righteous vengeance. And they have much to be vengeful about. More than any other hengeyokai, the Khan are a dying breed. All across Asia, their tiger kin are being hunted so that their body parts may be used in traditional medicines. Asian sorcerers add to this problem, using tiger parts as ingredients in alchemical potions, medicinal powders and other foci. The Khan are not amused. Other hengeyokai may dislike Chi'n Ta, but the Khan loathe the Namebreakers with a fury hotter than a thousand suns. As the Sixth Age draws ever closer, nothing can sway the Tiger-Children from defending their kin — not even if every wizard under Heaven stands in their way.

If you are hunted by the Tiger, then you have brought it upon yourself. It is you who chose to seek power through potions and elixirs

rather than through the enlightenment that comes from meditation and discipline. Do not blame the Tiger for fulfilling his dharma.

— Ng Thi Xian-Lan, Kannagara ascetic of the Akashic Brotherhood

I was at the docks in Kobe. Ling Chu's tip was right on the money. The Hiaku Gumi were smuggling in a shipment of tiger brains. So-called "doctors" use it to make a supposed cure for laziness. Or even worse, acne. That pretentious Dragon Wizard, Teng Dao-zi, was waiting for them. He always got first pick of whatever animal parts got smuggled in. At least he always did before that night. I hope that the spirits of my murdered family were somewhat appeased by his screams when I skinned him alive.

— Tiger Toranga, warlord of the Oni No Miza Gumi (Yakuza clan)

KITSUNE

Also known as Fox spirits or Nine-Tails.

Fox spirits have long plagued the mages of the Middle Kingdom. Throughout history, the Kitsune have interacted with the Chi'n Ta as lovers, rivals, fair-weather friends, bitter enemies, students and general pests. In truth, mages frustrate the Kitsune to no end. While the Nine-tails would never admit it, the reason for this frustration is simple — Sphere magic is the one type of human magic the Kitsune are utterly unable to learn. Despite centuries of study, spying, trickery, seduction, blackmail and even using mages as breeding partners, the Kitsune have failed to gain mastery over the Names of Heaven. Unlike the other hengeyokai, the Nine-Tails lack a special duty to perform for the Emerald Mother. The Hakken are her fangs, the Tengu her messengers, and the Zhong Lung her memory. But what are the Kitsune? More than a few fox spirits are convinced that learning the secrets of Sphere magic will finally make them the best breed of hengeyokai at something. One small and secret society of doshi (Kitsune sorcerers), known as the Midori-Okaasama no Meibo Rosui — The Namekeepers of the Emerald Mother — have taken this obsession to disturbing lengths. As the Sixth Age draws closer, and desperation sets in, members of the Meibo Rosui are not above kidnapping Chi'n Ta in order to torture the secrets of Sphere magic out of them.

Ah, yes. I once knew a Fox spirit. She was a rare beauty; her skin and eyes so perfect. She was the greatest lover I ever had, and I miss her terribly. But still, I needed her tails to complete the Nine Dragon Elixir. Such is the will of Heaven.

— Teng Hiang-ta, Wu Lung of the Seventh Office of Treasure.

Please, do not struggle. It will only make things difficult for you. Now, let us continue from yesterday. Please describe what you felt during this metaphysical "awakening." It is in your best interest to cooperate, I assure you. The machine has much higher settings than this.

— Fukikage Turo, Kitsune doshi and member of the Meibo Rosui, "questioning" a prisoner

NEZUMI

Also known as Shubei (ratlike scoundrels) or Shukuei (rat demons) in China; sometimes referred to as the Horde in Mongolia or the Thuggee in Southeast Asia.

Beneath the cities of the Middle Kingdom, there exists a secret empire. Hidden from the eyes of Heaven, the Nezumi rat demons plan for the coming of the Sixth Age. Living among the fringes of Asia's lowest social castes, they have become the unparalleled masters of Low War — the arts of assassination and terrorism. Like most hengeyokai, the Nezumi share a general dislike of Chi'n Ta. However, this dislike quickly falls to the wayside when pitted against the rat people's mercenary tendencies. If the price is right, a Nezumi offers his dark skills in the temporary service of a mage. But make no mistake. There is no loyalty in their hearts. A Nezumi completes the obligations of his contract and nothing more. Only the most deluded of fools believes a rat demon to be his ally.

At times, it becomes necessary to commit acts beneath the dignity of a member of the Magic Bureaucracy. On these occasions, it is best to gain the services of one who specializes in such disreputable activities. One can find few creatures more skilled in the arts of treachery, deceit and terror than the Rat Demons.

— Xiang Wen Gu, Wu Lung of the Fifth Office of Intelligence

The Namebreakers may hire our services all that they wish. In the end, it matters little. They are just one more group of monkeys to slaughter when we usher in the Sixth Age.

— Benjiro Mr. Sparkle, Nezumi Knife Skulker and Iron Leaf of the Smoking Thunder Sentai

TENGU

For the Chi'n Ta, the Tengu are a double-edged blade. Incorrigible gossips and snoops, the Tengu claim to know everything about everyone within the Middle Kingdom. And they are happy to share this information with other shen — for a price. This payment may be a simple as news on the current happenings of mage society or as complex as the prize Fu Lion statue from a Kuei-jin mandarin's heavily guarded art collection. It all depends on the value of the information, the whim of the Tengu and her attitude toward the mage in question. The Tengu also possess a dark sense of humor. Pity the Chi'n Ta who fails to show respect to the ways of Heaven, for she may find herself the target of increasingly troublesome — and even lethal — pranks.

In legend, the Tengu have masterful skill with swords, and some even live as hermits in the mountains. Swordsmen have taken pilgrimages to impress Tengu and convince them to part with their skills. Although the Tengu are tricky, there may be some truth to these rumors; still, no mage in the modern age has yet discovered the facts of the matter.

Yeah, if you can find one who's willing to deal with you, they're a great source of info. That is, if you can pay the price

they ask. I've dealt with them only twice. The first time, she just wanted me to set up a backdoor into the computer systems of a few corporations. No problem. The last time, I had to find out where this Yakuza guy was keeping his mistress. I'm lucky her bodyguards only broke my arm.

— Akita "Thunder Tiger" Gonshiro, member of the Five Rings Gama

Chi'n Ta burning bright; lightning flashing across the sky. After the lightning strikes, all that is left is a memory. Be careful, little lightning-girl, lest you too become nothing but a memory.

— SongJae-min, Tengu poet, dancer and freelance assassin

ZHONG LUNG

Dragons, of course, hold a place of honor in traditional East Asian culture. Among the more conservative Chi'n Ta — especially among the Wu Lung — this veneration extends to the Zhong Lung. Possessing wisdom and lore going back

THE GRAY CLOUDS TEMPLE

Throughout the Fifth Age, a small faction of Tengu known as the Gray Clouds Temple have continuously abducted young humans in order to train them as "goblin slayers." Lasting several years, this training is brutal and exhausting — not every student survives. Instruction includes the ways of bladesmanship, martial arts, shen lore (with a specific blind spot toward the weaknesses of the hengeyokai) and stealth. If a student shows an aptitude for the magic, the Tengu also instructs her in the ways of sorcery. These young hunters are then sent out into the Middle Kingdom charged with killing bakemono, Kuei-jin and those Namebreakers who offend the ways of Heaven through the use of vulgar magic. Exactly how a goblin slayer does this is her own business. Lacking a normal human education, many become day laborers, often drifting from town to town. Some find refuge among Buddhist or Shinto temples, but more than a few have opted for the life of a bandit or street gang member.

GOBLIN SLAYER CHARACTERS

Concepts: hermit, street tough, drifter, neighborhood protector, shinto priest, professional exorcist

Traits: While high Physical Traits are common, Mental and Social Traits are also seen as important — if you can't outfight a foe, then trick him into defeating himself. All Goblin Slayers have at least a basic understanding of Melee, Brawl/Martial Arts and Occult. Dodge and Awareness are also common skills.

Preferred Paths: Ephemera, Hellfire, Summoning, Binding & Warding are the only Paths taught by the Gray Clouds Temple. Slayers may learn other Paths provided they find someone willing to teach them.

Magical Style: Meditation, prayer scrolls, salt, martial arts, and archaic weapons are the most common foci used by slayers. See also **Demon Hunter X** for some ideas about the magics of Asian hunters.

as far as the Second Age, the Middle Dragons sometimes consent to share a small portion of this vast knowledge with those who show the proper respect both to the Dragon and to the forms of Heaven. But be warned. Dragons demand respect, and the wrath of an offended Zhong Lung is a most frightening sight to behold.

Whimsical tales and fancies tell of dragons that lair at the bottoms of ponds or who sleep among the clouds. Wisdom flows from their beneficence, and they sometimes act as messengers for Heaven. When dealt with equitably and politely, they enjoy human company — perhaps from such unions come the Dragon Kings. Indeed, in China it is said that the Dragon Kings ruled as emperors in truth, with a heritage combined of the dragon and the human. Perhaps the Wu Lung have a bit of dragon in them after all... or perhaps the true family of the dragon takes umbrage at such assumptions.

The Zhong Lung are the elder brothers to the Heavenly Dragon Emperor-Wizard, and fellow servants of Heaven. To give offense to one of the Zhong Lung is a most grievous and inauspicious breech of etiquette. Even worse, every Zhong Lung carries the memories of his ancestors, so you not only offend him, you offend his ancestors, going back to the depths of the Second Age. While a foreigner may be forgiven for such foolishness — what else can one expect of gweilo, after all — as a member of the Magical Bureaucracy you will be expected to know better.

— Chang Zhang-sung, Wu Lung of the Third Office of Tradition, and Sufi (instructing a chair of Sheng Shou).

It pleases us that there are still those Chi'n Ta who remember the ancient forms of honor and respect due the servants of Heaven. A pity that they grow rarer with every passing of the seasons. Far too many of the modern Namebreakers turn their backs on tradition, committing grave offenses in the eyes of the Emerald Mother. Truly this is a sign that the Sixth Age is upon us.

— Wang Ngoh, Nam Hsei of the Stream of Water, Silver Courtier and Historian of the Court of Five Chambers.

NAGAH

No living mage has ever seen a Nagah. Interpret that as you will.

KUMO

Throughout the Middle Kingdom, the Goblin Spiders are renowned for their cruelty, cunning and patience. No sane shen would count one as an ally nor seek one as an enemy. Willing — some say eager — servants of the Yama Kings, the Kumo spread their webs of influence across Asia, engaging in all manner of wicked activities. The wise Chi'n Ta never underestimates the Goblin Spiders' ability to adapt. One can just as easily find a Kumo sitting on the board of directors for a major Japanese corporation, acting as the enforcer for a Chinese drug Triad or leading an Infernal cult in the jungles of Indonesia. Ultimately, Kumo care little for mages. In their eyes, the Chi'n Ta are only humans, to be used as tools, dupes or food as the situation demands.

Burn its corpse. Kill its servants. Purify its lair with fire and with magic. Only then can you turn your back to one of the spider demons.

— Chamlong Suk, Vajrapani demon-hunter of the Akashic Brotherhood

Such raw power at their finger tips. A pity so many of them lack the imagination to use it effectively. Still, they make amusing pawns. And their blood is so delicious once they have exhausted their usefulness.

— Zong Hong-fu, Kumo leader of the Black Steel Centipede Triad

THE YELLOW SPRINGS

Those Chi'n Ta who deal with ancestors, ghosts and spirits of the dead — and in Asia, they are many — recognize the Yellow Springs as the rightful kingdom of the afterlife. While virtuous mortals can expect to go on to heavenly posts, to reincarnation or even to escape the Wheel of Existence completely, those who deserve punishment or are chosen to further the Bureaucracy of Hell find themselves cast into the Yellow Springs. Anguished ancestors and tormented shades alike speak of the terrible wrath of Yu Huang, and of the tortures they suffer in his pits and mines.

For the Chi'n Ta, one's opinion on Emperor Yu Huang and the Yellow Springs can be clarified by a single question: Are you Chinese? If so, then Yu Huang has rightfully asserted his dominance over the Yin World, just as China must assert its dominance over Asia. Such is the decree of Heaven. Otherwise, your ancestors labor under the yoke of Chinese invaders, their afterlife tormented by the wicked minions of the devil, Yu Huang. Ever since Emperor Yu Huang began his conquest of Asia's Shadowlands during the Fourth Age, the mages of the Middle Kingdom have been divided over the issue. Even the Akashic Brotherhood has not been immune to disagreement, as Tibetan, Japanese, and Vietnamese members square off against their Chinese Tradition-mates. The arrival of the imperial-leaning Wu Lung has only aggravated this debate. Meanwhile, the Avatar Storm has thrown the Yellow Springs into turmoil. After his failed invasion of the West, Yu Huang's army has suffered a serious blow. Throughout the Conquered Territories, armed rebellion now rages. Even among the Chinese dead, some ghosts silently question whether Yu Huang still holds the Mandate of Heaven. Dissident voices rise louder all the time.

For more information on the Yellow Springs, see *Dark Kingdom of Jade* and *Ends of Empire for Wraith: The Oblivion*.

CHINESE GHOST STORY

Even after the political ascension of communism, the honoring of one's ancestors remains a part of Chinese culture. For the Chi'n Ta — often able to interact directly with their ancestors via Spirit magic — this tradition

of honor and appeasement is even more important. The Wu Lung have long considered the Jade Emperor, Yu Huang, a great and powerful ally, even during his living days as Qin Shihuang, the First Emperor. The Akashics, Wu-Keng and Dreamspeakers have their contacts among the Yellow Springs as well. Unfortunately, troubled times have come to the Jade Empire. The Avatar Storm has in no way impeded communication with the ancestors, but the great storms raging throughout the Yin World continue to bring chaos and upheaval. Some even whisper tales of the dead rising from their graves in forms unlike that of the Wan Kuei. Surely this is one more sign that the Sixth Age draws ever closer.

As we of the Magical Bureaucracy are meant to guide and lead the realm of the living in a manner pleasing to Heaven, the servants of Yu Huang are meant to guide and lead the realm of the dead. Those of you who do not gain the level of enlightenment necessary to gain service in the Heavenly Kingdom of Jade should fear not, for you are guaranteed a place within the bureaucracy of the Yellow Springs.

— Chang Zhang-sung, Wu Lung of the Third Office of Tradition, and Sufi (instructing a chair of Sheng Shou)

Yes, I am quite familiar with the Wu Lung. Yu Huang may wish for people to forget, but I cannot. It was the Dragon Wizard, Fu Xia, who helped Qin Shihuang, First Emperor of China, become Yu Huang, the Jade Emperor of the Yellow Springs. It was Fu Xia who instructed his artificers in building the terra-cotta soldiers who became Yu Huang's Immortal Guard. And so it was Fu Xia who became the Dragon Emperor Wizard. And had the Celestial Emperor not sent the maelstrom to punish the Jade Emperor for acting outside of his role under heaven, the Dragon Wizards would have gleefully stood by Yu Huang's side when he became the Demon Emperor of the Sixth Age.

— Sima Qian, former court historian of the Jade Empire and now Keeper of the Iron Box

GH^OSTS IN THE REST OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

As in China, the honoring of one's ancestors is important in the rest of the Middle Kingdom. Outside of China, the ancestors are most distressed. For centuries, the Yellow Springs of Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have been under the heel of Yu Huang's boot. Little more than slaves, the dead in these regions must bow to the whims of the Yellow Springs. Mages outside China are most distressed to discover their families and ancestors tortured, broken and turned screaming into raw ephemera for the Chinese empire. Japan's Clan Bushido, the remaining National Dragons of Korea, Emilio Aguinaldo's Filipino guerilla army and countless other groups rise up against Yu Huang's forces. To these renegade freedom fighters, mages offer the possibility of powerful allies. Surviving ancestors seek out their Awakened descendants

with hopes that the living still remember how to honor those that came before them.

Ironic, is it not? Never before have our enslaved ancestors had such an opportunity to drive out the Chinese dogs who keep them in chains. And that which has given them this chance makes aiding them all the more difficult. Still, we do what we can. Ten months ago, the spirit of my grandfather asked me to go to Macao. Why? To steal a three-hundred-year-old teacup. Grandfather used it to blackmail one of the Chinese administrators. The freedom fighters of Nha Trang are now better armed than the local patrols.

— Che Lien, Vietnamese spirit medium and Orphan.

The spirits of your ancestors are enslaved by the demon emperor Yu Huang and the whoresons who lick his boots, and you dare to speak of this "war of Ascension"? The divine winds of hell have thrown the armies of Yu Huang into disarray. Now is the time to strike and drive the invaders from our islands. If you do not stand with us, then you bring shame upon yourself and your family.

— Fujita Daigoro, Clan Bushido freedom fighter and renegade.

THE HS^IEN

Relations between the hsien and the Chi'n Ta are among the most cordial to be found among the shen, even given the much-vaunted politeness and studious lack of interest in others' affairs common to the East. Even expatriate mages who have gotten well past their culture shock and know the appropriate forms and courtesies may gain the approval of the hsien, and thereby their occasional assistance, should he

M^OR^TWIGHTS

During events of great horror and tragedy, it is not uncommon for wraiths to be born in the Yellow Springs already dominated by their P'o — the dark, self-destructive and animalistic part of the soul which ultimately serves the Yomi Kings. Called Mortwrights in the West, these vengeful spirits often lash out in fits of great pain and furious anger.

The Middle Kingdom has had more than its fair share of atrocity. While the Jade Empire has managed to capture and harness those Mortwrights generated by such events as the Taiping Rebellion, the Japanese massacres in Nanking and other areas, and the Cultural Revolution, they have been far less successful in places such as Cambodia and East Timor. In Cambodia, the local renegades have managed to turn the Mortwrights' rage against the armies of Yu Huang. Finding that one's ancestors have been reduced to such a state can be distressing for a mage. Asian necromancers continuously experiment with ways to return the spirits of fallen ancestors to the path of righteousness. Perhaps a clever young mage (like one of the player's characters) will discover the secret.

bring the appropriate gifts and concessions to the table. The hsien are also not shy about letting their Chi'n Ta associates know that the hsien bore the responsibility for teaching the Lightning People how to master their gifts during the terrible war that followed the fall of the Ten Thousand Immortals so long ago.

This formal and achingly polite acquaintance and millennia-long history of association does not imply familiarity, however. Just as the hsien know very little about the Traditions, the Zaibatsu or other magical groups, so to the mages know only the beginnings of the strange natures of the hsien. Students of the old ways of the Middle Kingdom recognize the hsien as having once been the ministers, scholars and messengers of the Celestial Courts. What they are doing in the physical world, stripped of their celestial glory and trapped in the borrowed bodies of humans, remains a mystery.

The broad array of types of hsien adds to the confusion. The hsien divide themselves into kamuii (nobility) and hirayanu (commoners). This knowledge is typically easy to come by; upon first meeting of hsien and Chi'n Ta, the hsien will make perfectly clear exactly how much respect he or she is due. There is one race of kamuii and one race of hirayanu for each of the five classical elements: wood, metal, fire, earth and water. This knowledge is relatively simple to extrapolate, once the mage has been fortunate enough to meet more than one hsien — they do not hide their elemental heritage. In addition to their elemental affinity, the hirayanu also take on an assortment of animal forms: serpent, badger, cat, monkey and carp. Once again, these hsien do little to hide their animal natures; a perceptive mage may be able to discern the hsien's type from her personal habits or accoutrements.

Finally, to complete the perplexity of mage-hsien relations, the hsien divide themselves into myriad political groups. Some of these groups appear to be geographically based but have little relation to the national boundaries of the day-to-day world. Other groups appear to be based on philosophical leanings, and yet others appear connected solely to the control and maintenance of temporal power and influence. What the Chi'n Ta know to be true of one particular hsien's thoughts and feelings is unlikely to be true of another's. Of course, the same is true of the mages in the eyes of the hsien — an individual's goals and motives are impossible to deduce from those of any other. Both hsien and Chi'n Ta are best served by conducting their dealings on an individual basis.

The hsien seem to have the capability to use an elemental magic — but it is not the kind of magic that a mage works in setting his will upon reality, nor is it the ritualized magic that a sorcerer works. It seems to be innate to their natures, as it requires no foci and incurs no Paradox, yet it is as flexible in application as its wielder's imagination. The power to work their magic comes from the belief of the people they protect, the people who still remember the old traditions. Knowledgeable Chi'n Ta know that the hsien call their art Wu Tan,

"The Five Alchemies." There seems to be a sixth alchemy that the hsien may call upon — but they are far less willing to share the details of that mysterious path. Young mages and inexperienced hsien both benefit from shared magical study, as there is much to be learned from both the similarities and differences in their magical practices.

The hsien's relations with the mages of the Zaibatsu are entirely different. Because of their elemental nature, the hsien are tied to the land. The Metal Dragons do not evince the same degree of concern for the environment: resources are depleted, the land stripped, the water polluted, all in the name of progress. To the Zaibatsu, the hsien are emissaries of a past best left behind — perhaps remembered fondly, but never returned to. At best, then, the hsien and their protected lands are ignored. At worst, the hsien are hunted by heavily armed strike forces, their lands mined, flooded or developed, and the people who once supported the hsien with their belief moved into concrete-block apartment buildings and given menial factory jobs. The hsien work against the Metal Dragons in any way they can, whether sharing information with the organization's enemies or occasionally taking direct action against company holdings or production facilities. As this cycle of repercussions becomes entrenched, the hsien face the danger of moving from the Zaibatsu "To Do" list into the "Urgent Business" file.

The dark elements of both groups maintain their own friendly relations. The Wu-Keng have plenty of opportunity to encounter and entreat with the Kura Sau, the corrupted hsien who long ago pledged to serve the Yama Kings. These groups share even more in common than untainted Chi'n Ta and hsien — they practice the same warped magic — the black magics of the Hac Tao. The Wu-Keng can learn much from the Kura Sau, but such knowledge always comes at a price; the Kura Sau are favored servants of the Yama Kings, and their time and talents are valuable to their masters. The Wu-Keng, or any who wish to practice the black arts, often summon the Kura Sau with rituals of murder and mutilation — the Kura Sau need the bodies of such victims to inhabit the physical world. The animated bodies are held together by sheer power. For providing such service, the summoner may be granted instruction in Hac Tao or some service; the summoner is also granted the continued temptation of the minions of the hells and an invitation to visit upon her death.

Storytellers who intend to include extensive interactions with the hsien in their chronicles are encouraged to pick up *Land of Eight Million Dreams* for a detailed view of the hsien and their complicated society.

MYTHIC BEASTS

KIRIN

Sometimes compared to the Western unicorn, kirin are servants of the Celestial Emperor, and symbols of virtue and purity. Kirin vary in appearance. Most seem to combine

features of a short-necked giraffe, horse, deer, and on rare occasions, a dragon. They can always be identified by the fleshy horn which protrudes from their forehead. Kirin are the relentless foes of all enemies of Heaven and defenders of the just and pure. During the Fourth and early parts of the Fifth Age, Kirin appeared in the material world in order to rally heroes and champions to face great evils and complete epic quests. Sadly, the modern Middle Kingdom appears inhospitable to these noble creatures. There has been no confirmed kirin sighting in the material world for over a century, and Umbral meetings were extraordinarily rare even before the Avatar Storm. Many mages take this as yet another sign that the Sixth Age is beginning. Others refuse to give up hope, patiently waiting — and fervently praying — for the time when the kirin return to the Middle Kingdom, seeking heroes once again.

The following Traits represent the typical Kirin (if such a thing exists).

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Stamina 6, Charisma 5, Manipulation 2, Appearance 5, Perception 3, Intelligence 4, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Cosmology 3, Dodge 3, Empathy 4, Enigma 3, Etiquette 4, Intimidation 4, Stealth 3

Willpower: 8

Health Levels: OK x3, -1 x2, -2 x2, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Armor Rating: 2 (two additional soak dice)

Attacks/Powers: Trample or Kick for five or six dice of damage, Arcane 5, Flight (may walk or run through the air at normal speed), Information Font (grants prophecies and advice to those that honor the ways of Heaven), Mystic Shield

(four dice of countermagic), Rapid Healing (recovers from damage at the rate of one health level lower — bruised to wounded health levels lost to bashing damage

are recovered in one noncombat turn each, maimed health levels lost to bashing damage are recovered in one hour, and so on; bruised health levels lost to lethal damage are recovered in 12 hours, and so on), Soul-Sense (may read auras as the Mind • Effect), Spirit Travel (can enter the Yang Realm as the Spirit ••• Effect)

Weaknesses: Thaumivore (must consume one point of Tass a day; takes one health level of lethal damage for every two days without food), No Dexterous Limbs

FU LIONS

Watchdogs of order and civility, these lesser dragons are charged by the Celestial Bureaucracy to safeguard holy sites and protect the virtuous. These stocky creatures resemble a cross between a lion, a dog and a dragon, with a thick mane, menacing eyes and razor-sharp teeth. Despite their frightening appearance, Fu Lions are quite intelligent and exceedingly polite. During the Mythic Ages, Fu Lions would stand guard over the entrances of temples, including those of the Akashic Brotherhood, as well as the libraries and courts of the Wu Lung and the hsien.

As time passed, many of the temples and courts fell or were abandoned, and the mages grew ever rarer. Those Fu Lions who remain in the material world often seek out libraries or temples to protect,



quietly standing vigil (and growing slightly depressed for lack of people to talk to). Others look for mage Chantries to attach themselves to. The Hermetic Chantry in Hong Kong has had a Fu Lion guardian since the 1880s. A few have found service with the hengeyokai Beast Courts or with the hsien. Others have chosen to seek their fate outside of the Middle Kingdom.

The following Traits represent the typical Fu Lion who has found a role guarding a Chantry or temple.

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Stamina 5, Charisma 5, Manipulation 2, Appearance 4, Perception 4, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 3, Athletics 5, Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Etiquette 3, Intimidation 4, Linguistics 3 (Fu Lions seem to have a natural talent for languages),

Willpower: 7

Health Levels: OK x3, -1 x3, -3 x2, -5, Incapacitated

Armor Rating: 3 (three additional soak die)

Attacks/Powers: Bite for Strength +3 dice, claw for Strength +2 dice; Acute Senses (difficulty for all feats involving physical senses reduced by three), Acute Smell (two additional dice for all Perception rolls involving scent), Healing Lick (restores one health level per turn to the lion or someone else; can not be used to heal aggravated damage), Mystic Shield (one dice of countermagic), Spirit Vision (may see into the Yin and Yang Realms, as the Spirit • Effect)

Weakness: Compulsion (Fu Lions cannot break their word once given; if they do, all dice pools are halved until the lion has spent one month undergoing ritual atonement at a temple.)

KAPPA

The kappa are Japanese water goblins, usually the size of a child. They have green scaly skin, webbed hands and feet and an apelike face with long hair. The crown of a kappa's head is indented, forming a small bowl that is filled with water. Traditionally, these small monsters ambushed travelers, dragging the human underwater to drown so that the goblin could drink his blood and eat his flesh. When Japan began its industrialization during the 19th century, the kappa suffered as water pollution caused many of them to sicken and die. Those that were strong enough to survive, however soon began to thrive under the industrial conditions. While the rare traditional kappa are sometimes found in Japan's rural rivers, their more monstrous industrialized cousins now choose to make their homes in the sewers and storm drains of Tokyo and other Japanese metropoli. Here, these creatures continue their old habits of ambush and murder, often feeding on stray animals and the homeless. More than a few have developed a taste for the flesh of young children.

The following traits represent the typical urban Kappa. Older Kappa usually have somewhat higher Traits, particularly Physical Attributes.

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS?

Beings of seemingly infinite power and wisdom, Celestial Dragons have been recognized by Chi'n Ta as servants of Heaven and of the Celestial Emperor for millennia. Unfortunately, no Celestial Dragon has been seen in the Middle Kingdom since the end of the Fourth Age. Even encounters in the Yang Realm became increasingly rare. A mage who encountered a dragon on the other side of the Wall could easily find himself welcome among the halls of the Wu Lung and the temples of the Akashics — scholars and sages seek to record, interpret and scrutinize the most minute details of such meetings. After the dragon Tian An Lei visited Kun Lun in 1632, Wu Lung scholars discussed and debated the event for the next century. Denizens of the Middle Kingdom have long believed that when the Celestial Dragons returned, it signifies the beginning of the Sixth Age. In the summer of 1999, apocalyptic visions of dragons, demons and other creatures infested the dreams of mages and sorcerers throughout the Middle Kingdom, just as the Avatar Storm began blowing. Many younger Chi'n Ta take these signs as evidence that the new Age has already begun.

Storytellers interested in including Celestial Dragons in their chronicles are encouraged look at *World of Darkness: Bygone Bestiary* and its material on Great Celestial Dragons.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 1, Manipulation 3, Appearance 0, Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Athletics 3 (Swimming), Brawl 3, Dodge 1, Stealth 3, Survival 3

Willpower: 4

Health Levels: OK, -1 x2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Armor Rating: 1 (one additional soak die)

Attacks/Powers: Claws (Strength +2 damage), Regrowth (kappa may reattach severed limbs by spending a Willpower point; limbs severed by weapons doing aggravated damage and the teeth and claws of other supernatural beings or Prime-enchanted swords, for example — may not be reattached this way), Water Breathing (breaths underwater just as easily as on land)

Weakness: If the water from the "bowl" on top of the kappa's head is spilled, his dice pools are halved until it is refilled.

THE YAMA KINGS

When the Celestial Emperor created the Ten Thousand Things, even demons had their role within the Celestial Bureaucracy. Charged with punishing the wicked, these beings created their own spirit realms, each engineered to

administer divine justice as the demon lord saw fit. But over the millennium, the Lords of Hell have grown corrupt and now openly rebel against the ways of Heaven, each seeking to overthrow the Celestial Emperor and set himself up as Demon Emperor of the Sixth Age. Collectively, these demon lords are known as the Yama Kings (there are Queens as well) and their collected kingdoms — scattered throughout the Yang and Yin Worlds — are known as the Thousand Hells.

Among the more famous Lords of Yomi are:

MIKABOSHI, LORD OF THE WICKED CITY

Once a mortal member of the Dalou'laoshi, Mikaboshi fell to the path of Infernalism and soon elevated himself to the position of one of the weaker Yama Kings. When the Meiji Restoration began, Mikaboshi's power increased tenfold, as he rapidly adapted to the new changes in technology. Now he ranks among the most powerful and devious of the Lords of Hell. His mortal servants, both Chi'n Ta and mundane alike, rise to positions of power in corporations and organized crime families throughout the Middle Kingdom's industrialized cities. Often, these men and women are enhanced with hidden cybernetics that rival even Iteration X's work.

RANGDA, THE QUEEN OF PESTILENCE

Though her power has waxed and waned over the years, Rangda is at a high point as the Sixth Age begins. Plague and disease — and the death that comes with it — adds to her power daily. The past century has filled her with a dark glee as first Japanese germ warfare in China and now Southeast Asia's HIV epidemic cause her empire to grow in leaps and bounds. Her servants work to hasten the spread of sickness however they can, be it through the prevention of health education, the encouragement of unregulated prostitution, or cutting-edge research in the fields of nuclear and biochemical warfare. Progenitors and Etherites who fall into her clutches become prize servants.

HAHA NO FUKAMI, THE EMPRESS OF PEARLS

Charged with punishing crimes against the ocean, as well as those whose crimes involve fire or water, the Empress rules over the Hell of Seven Burning Seas. Unlike the other Yama Kings, she has not rebelled against the Celestial Emperor and continues to acknowledge her role under Heaven. While she is capable of drawing power from the suffering of those who dwell in her realm (just as the other Lords of Hell do), she draws the bulk of her power from the elemental strength of the oceans and volcanoes of the South Pacific. Sorcerers and even some Dreamspeakers in Micronesia honor her in their ceremonies and even reap the benefit of her patronage. (Despite Wu Lung or Akashic harping to the contrary, these mages are no more *barabi* than Verbena Odin worshipers or Euthanatoi Kali cultists are.)

For more information on the Yama Kings and their realms, see *The Thousand Hells for Kindred of the East*.

DEITION OF IRON AND VIOLENCE

These savage and brutal cyborgs enforce Mikaboshi's will throughout the Wicked City and, if need be, the Middle Kingdom. Enhanced with bionic limbs, subdermal armor and internal weaponry ranging from chain guns and automatic grenade launchers to flame throwers and chainsaws, these hulking thugs relentlessly chase down their targets and terminate them with extreme prejudice (often causing a great deal of collateral damage in the process).

The following Traits represent a typical Demon of Iron and Violence:

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 4, Stamina 6, Charisma 0, Manipulation 1, Appearance 0, Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 5, Athletics 3, Brawl 5, Dodge 2, Firearms 4, Intimidation 4, Linguistics 3, Melee 3, Stealth 2, Streetwise 2

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: -0 x7, -1 x2, -2 x2, -5, Incapacitated

Armor Rating: 4 (four additional soak dice; can be used to soak aggravated damage)

Weapons: retractable claws (Strength +2 lethal damage), assault rifle (Damage 10, Range 250, Clip 100 rounds, not concealable), additional weapons as required

Powers: Acute Senses (difficulty for all feats involving physical senses reduced by three), Enhanced Reflexes (can take three additional actions per turn without splitting dice pools), Limited Invisibility (the demon may disappear into shadows and remain invisible as long as he remains quiet and does not move faster than a walk; requires a Perception + Alertness roll, difficulty 6, to detect), Spirit Vision (may see into the Yin and Yang Realms, as the Spirit • Effect)

PLAQUE ZOMBIE

Appearing as attractive young men and women, these creatures are sent into the less developed areas of the Middle Kingdom, in order to spread death and disease in the name of their mistress, Rangda. Anyone who touches a zombie runs the risk of contagion. HIV, influenza and bubonic plague are only a few of the diseases these creatures carry. Some fear that Rangda may be hoping to introduce Ebola or something even worse into the Middle Kingdom.

The following Traits represent the typical Plague Zombie who has been active for several months.

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 4, Manipulation 4, Appearance 4, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Brawl 1, Etiquette 3, Melee: 1, Seduction: 3, Subterfuge 3

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: -0 x2, -1 x2, -2 x2, -5, Incapacitated

Armor Rating: 0

Powers: Plague Carrier (any time the zombie makes flesh-to-flesh contact with a human, the victim must gain at least one success on a difficulty 7 Stamina roll; if the victim fails, he is infected with whatever disease the zombie is carrying), Death Fertility (stimulates the rapid growth of any parasite, infection, disease or cancer that the victim is already suffering from; the zombie must make flesh-to-flesh contact and make a Willpower roll with the difficulty equaling the victim's Willpower; for each success, the zombie inflicts one health level of lethal damage)

Note: Plague zombies can be detected using Life • Effects, assuming that the mage knows what he's looking for. Life •• and •••• Effects may be used to purge a body of the zombie's contagion if the mage acts quickly enough (time limits, as well as questions of vulgarity, are left to the Storyteller to decide).

These represent just two of the vast multitudes of different Asian demons. Feel free to let your twisted imagination run wild and surprise your players with something they aren't prepared for.

BAKEMONO

In the Middle Kingdom, humans — and sometimes animals — are desperate, unfortunate, or wicked enough to become minions of the Yama Kings. Known as bakemono, these men and women become corrupted, both mentally and physically, by the demons possessing their bodies. While the demon provides its host with a variety of horrific powers, it also inflicts the human with any number of Derangements, physical ailments, or sickening addictions (murder, rape, and cannibalism are only some of the more *mundane* compulsions these twisted creatures have).

Traditionally, these monsters were created through demonic summoning, Infernalist pacts or simple random circumstance. Now, as the Fifth Age ends, countless new causes for these horrors have arisen. When the American occupation of Japan began, Technocracy agents were forced to deal with radioactive humanoids generated by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rumors persist that the use of Agent Orange and even stranger chemicals in Vietnam have led to the creation of entire clans of bakemono living in isolated villages. One Iron Triangle drug Triad, led by a willing servant of the Yama Kings, is believed to sell opium capable of creating bakemono with bizarre mind-numbing psychic powers. Some Japanese mages even hold tainted manga responsible for the creation of several tentacled monstrosities.

Asian Nephandi are known to employ the creatures as bodyguards and servants. Several Triads and at least one Yakuza clan are believed to — sometimes knowingly — include bakemono as enforcers and assassins. Some of the more monstrous Wan Kuei and Kumo seem to keep them as servants or pets.

Bakemono Powers

The average bakemono (a misleading phrase) usually has three powers. Weaker or more subtle creatures may have fewer, while rare and powerful horrors may have more. Typical powers include:

- **Armor** — This is often in the form of reptilian skin, a crustacean shell, or even sumolike layers of fat and muscle; a few of the modern high-tech bakemono seem to sport cybernetic subdermal polymer plates. Add three dice to all soak rolls, including the soaking of lethal (difficulty 6) and aggravated (difficulty 8) damage.

- **Claws and Fangs** — The bakemono may attack using claw and bite maneuvers, with wounds causing Strength +1 aggravated damage.

- **Demonic Strength** — The bakemono has five additional dots to divide among his Physical Attributes (with a maximum rating of 8).

- **Extra Limbs** — These may resemble additional humanoid arms and legs, tentacles, insectlike appendages or even a tail. The bakemono gains three additional dice in grapple attempts.

- **Hive Body** — Small sphincters on the bakemono's body release tiny, horrid animals. Spiders, scorpions and insects are the more common creatures, but some bakemono are known to summon vipers or rats. Typically, the bakemono releases the equivalent of a small swarm of the vermin; consider the swarm a single entity with five health levels, capable of inflicting a level of lethal damage each turn (due to the number of creatures involved, no attack roll need be made). If the vermin are poisonous, use the poison rules from *Mage Revised* (p. 249). The bakemono may also use the vermin as spies, reviewing their memories once they re-enter his body.

- **Mind Blast** — The bakemono can psychically assault a target's mind, either with physical pain, emotional trauma or even sensory deprivation. The bakemono must spend one Willpower and roll Wits + Alertness (resisted by the victim's Willpower). The victim cannot act for one turn for each of the bakemono's successes.

- **Regeneration** — Even in combat, the bakemono may spend a Willpower point and make a Stamina roll, difficulty 8, to heal either two health levels lost to Bashing damage, or one health level lost to lethal damage. This can be done only once per turn, although the bakemono may take other actions while regenerating. Aggravated damage is recovered at the rate of one health level per day. These bakemono often have incredibly increased metabolisms (requiring them to eat three or more times the amount of food a normal human does) or are forced to eat strange or even horrific substances (rotted meat, blood, human brains).

- **Yomi Kiai** — The bakemono is able to strike terror into the hearts of everyone near her by issuing a monstrous

shout (often in the form of a piercing scream or animal-like roar). The bakemono rolls Charisma + Intimidation against her opponents' Willpower; those affected must run as fast and far as they can to get away from the bakemono, for two turns per success.

For more information on bakemono, as well as additional powers, see *The Book of the Wyrm 2nd Edition* and *Freak Legion: A Players Guide to Fomori for Werewolf: The Apocalypse*.

HUNTERS

Unlike their Western counterparts, Asian supernaturals do not enforce a "masquerade" or "veil." The shen expect their own members to be smart enough not to draw mortal attention to themselves and count on mortals to stay out of affairs that don't concern them. But some mortals believe that the shen are their business.

THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

When Wan Kuei hold midnight wars, or hengeyokai commit acts of ecoterrorism, China's national police force must deal with the fallout. If a crime shows "unusual circumstances," agents of Office 21 are sent in. Like their counterparts in the FBI-SAD, these men and women specialize in dealing with crimes of a paranormal nature. After an investigation, isolated incidents are usually filed away and ignored (unless a pattern seems to emerge). However, if the shen in question are judged to be a threat to China's national security, then Office 21 cracks down with all the force they and the Ministry's paramilitary Special Rapid Reaction Force can muster. Regardless of the investigations outcome, possible paranormal events are *always* covered up by both Public Security and the New China News Agency.

Mages in China may come under Ministry scrutiny if they appear to be engaging in "subversive activities" — leading cults, attempting political reform, stealing cultural artifacts or acting as spies for foreign powers. Tradition mages often believe Office 21 to be a front for the New World Order. In truth, the agency came about on its own, but the Chinese NWO is perfectly happy to aid Office 21 when it suits its purposes.

THE ARCANUM

The scholars of the Arcanum first took a serious interest in the Middle Kingdom during the 1960s. Since that time, full chapter houses have been established in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore, with colony houses and lodges seeded throughout other major cities. Here, members seek to investigate the various supernatural phenomenon and mystical traditions of East Asia. Thus, for the past few decades, mages and sorcerers in the Middle Kingdom have occasionally been the subject of observation by curious gweilo — some hopelessly naive, others surprisingly astute.

Over the past year, the Arcanum has suffered a tragedy in Asia. A chapter house in Seoul was burned and all four

members were killed. So far, two lodges have been sent to investigate. Neither group has been heard from in several months. The Tokyo chancellor fears the worst.

STRIKE FORCE ZERO

For the past ten years, the Japanese government has covertly licensed and subsidized Strike Force Zero, a corporately sponsored squad of paranormal exterminators. Zero agents are drawn from backgrounds ranging from law enforcement and medical research to Yakuza assassins and psychic researchers. Equipped with ultra high-tech weaponry and advanced cybernetics, Zero Agents have rapidly become a thorn in the shen community's side.

Strike Force Zero's intelligence on mages and sorcerers is sketchy at best. Researchers believe that "magic" is simply a manifestation of powerful psychic abilities, often focused through rituals and props. Strike Force Zero parapsychologist Dr. Burukkus Deidera has created a classification system for "Psionically Active Humanoids" based on types of power manifested and the level of power the "psion" has access to. Power types include biokinesis (control over the physical forms of themselves and other beings), psychokinesis (control over various forms of matter and energy) and clairsentience (extrasensory perception, telepathy and mind control). Power levels range from Class 1 (low level powers; in gamespeak, most one- and some two-dot Spheres, sorcery Paths, or psychic powers) to Class 3 (extremely dangerous; most Adept and Master-level Spheres, and five- and six-dot paths). At present, Strike Force Zero has only run across two Class 3 psions. One is Hei Yugou, leader of the Black Demon Tong and Class 3 biokinetic, reputed to have turned at least two agents inside out while leaving them alive and aware. The other is Ravil Ashimin, a Kazakhstani expatriate and former KGB agent turned freelance corporate spy and troubleshooter. Of the five-man team sent to arrest Ashimin, two apparently committed suicide and a third surfaced eight months later as the leader of a doomsday cult among Kobe's homeless population. The other two remain missing. Dr. Burukkus has put forth the theory of a Class 4 psion, but field agents don't like to think about such things.

THE SHIH

Picture this: The last rays of the setting sun illuminate a winding road. There is a village below; the sounds of celebration — music, firecrackers and laughter — are carried faintly on the wind. Walking away from the merriment is a lone man carrying only a walking staff and small sack. His clothes are shabby and torn, his face and hands scarred. He is one of the Shih. He has saved the village below from the depredations of the shen, but he does not stay for the celebration. He still has work to do.

The Shih are solitary warriors whose purpose in life is to protect humans from the supernatural creatures of the night. Although their goal is timeless, their methods are distinctly anachronistic; the harsh methods they use to train their bodies

and minds to the formidable task of battling the shen have passed unchanged from master to pupil for centuries. Their legendary solitude is imposed both from without and within. The Shih must keep moving, or the forces they fight might pin them down, or worse, find people that the otherwise dauntless warrior cares about and use them as weapons against him. This tactic, added to the inevitable disassociation from the masses of humanity that comes with fighting horrors on a daily basis, keeps the Shih alone but for the rare and brief companionship of a peer or the onerous responsibility of training a student.

The Shih do not choose their students so much as happen upon them. Every Shih warrior once lost someone she loved dearly to the convoluted schemes or naked claws of the shen. The survivors of such horror are the only students with sufficient drive to survive the brutal fifteen to twenty years of training required to master the rudiments of the Shih's ancient martial arts and mental techniques. Children are often trained to channel their need for vengeance from a very young age — this is not a choice made by the Shih master but a simple necessity when the child's relatives are all victims of a supernatural attack. These children are often the most implacable foes the shen must face, since they have known no life but the war.

Even though they are driven by a need for vengeance, the Shih are not indiscriminate killers. They are believers in the old ways of existence, that every one of the Ten Thousand Things has a reason and a purpose. The Kuei-jin must feed on the blood of humans to survive — but when they slaughter innocent children for bloody feasts, they have gone too far. The hengeyokai exist to protect sacred natural sites — but when they butcher the family members of sailors involved in the latest unfortunate oil spill, they have overstepped their bounds. It is the exception to the implicit rules of co-existence that draws the wrath of the Shih, and for every one that falls in righteous battle, there is always another waiting to step away from the throng of humanity and into the fray.

All but the most powerful mages of the Technocratic Union and the Traditions are more human than the other shen. Even the most alien-seeming willworker has the trappings and very form of humanity to remind her of her roots. Perhaps for this reason, mages are less prone than other shen to abuse their power flagrantly. This continued claim to humanity does not protect a mage who chooses to harm innocents or who is willfully negligent when using his power. The Shih occasionally intervened in the pogrom carried out by the Five Metal Dragons — not to rescue the Tradition mages but to keep the common people safe from the running magical battles that inevitably caught bystanders. The Shih are not inclined to be charitable when vulgar displays of magical ability claim lives; even a small display may bring the Shih to the mage's door to courteously inquire why the mage felt the need to carelessly endanger his fellow subway passengers. The Shih can always be counted on in battles

against Nephandi or Marauders, of course. They are especially effective against Marauders because they are not susceptible to the Paradox that is amplified by the Marauders' presence; they are also relatively immune to the Infernal blandishments of the Nephandi. The Shih often die in these encounters — but they die well.

The mystical abilities of the Shih are a bit of a puzzle to Awakened mages. How the abilities function is not confusing — as with any form of magic, the Shih shape an intent and infuse that intent with power using various rituals and foci. The rituals and foci — commonly prayers, chants, blades and staffs — are understandable, even predictable. The confusion arises over the source of the Shih's magical power. Mages who have watched the Shih in action claim that the Shih draw their power from themselves; they are not focusing the ambient power of the universe through an Avatar, as a mage would, or channeling it through potent rites and foci, as a sorcerer would. They draw upon the very essence of their beings, focusing their life energy into a weapon to use against the creatures of the night. This is inevitably painful and damaging, and it is likely the reason the Shih prefer to rely on fists, feet and blades when they can. The essence of the mages' confusion lies with this: Why do these wielders of magic, so well trained in the focussing of energy, never learn to look outside themselves for a source of power? Why do they not take the next step and Awaken?

No mage knows. Perhaps the nature of self-reliance prohibits the Shih from looking beyond a vendetta to a malleable universe. The Shih, for their part, seem uninterested in such speculation; no Shih desires to become one of the monsters that he hunts. Even a Shih who developed such power would likely never find the means to use it; the Shih shuns the trappings of other mages and instead focus upon his own skills and never has the true desire necessary to enforce his will upon the world. (Many scholars claim that Yi the Excellent Archer, the first Shih warrior, was an Awakened mage — but none would say that he muddled along, and few would suggest this to a Shih.)

DEMON-HUNTERS AS WITNESSES

One of the World of Darkness' strange little ironies is that neither Shih nor Strike Force Zero agents count as witnesses when around vulgar magic. As part of their decade of training, Shih are mentally hardened against the Middle Kingdom's horrors and oddities. When one is accustomed to battling Devil Tigers, Kumo and baken-mono, the idea of cyborgs and men throwing fireballs seems almost mundane. As for Strike Force Zero, their familiarity with cybernetics and genetic engineering leaves them highly accepting of the Technocracy's Enlightened Science, and Dr. Burukkus's psion theory is so flexible that agents can rationalize almost any magical Effect to fit within it. Of course, somethings are simply too outrageous, sotake care...)



CHAPTER FIVE: FIVE ELEMENTAL DRAGONS



For centuries, the Elemental Dragons have remained hidden to outsiders, even to foreigners that embraced the dictates of reason and order. Many, indeed, have successfully passed themselves off as devoted members of one of the Western Technocrats or another, leaving Iteration X and the New World Order under the confused belief that they were indeed in control of the Asian countries — and even to take credit for their achievements and disasters. The Elemental Dragons, of course, agree with only half of this.

The secrecy, for the Elemental Dragons, served several useful purposes. First, and most obvious, it made them less of a target. Several shen, determined to sow disorder and chaos among the Masses, felt the need to attack organizations working only for the common good — and thus, such organizations must be hidden for their own security. The Elemental Dragons never mentioned their own names and locations, of course, but released tidbits about the Metal Dragons from time to time, if it seemed that certain shen had a desperate

need for chaos elements. In most cases, the Metal Dragons were well able to handle any situations — even if a few did relieve them of some of their less competent agents. And in other cases... well, the loss of people on the quest for order is to be regretted, of course. On the other hand, business has no room for incompetence.

Secrecy also allows the Elemental Dragons to continue their own work undisturbed. “Miscalculations” could now be conveniently blamed on the so-called Metal Dragons — the term applied to the Western Conventions. If the Elemental Dragons never mentioned their own names and locations, they were more than willing to release information about the Metal Dragons — and even more willing to direct troublesome shen towards certain corporations under Western control, thus taking care of two problems at once. Indeed, this became a large part of the Miao Guan’s policy — successfully keeping the level of technology down and the level of order high.

More importantly, this secrecy sprang from the Asian reluctance to show sensitive matters openly. While the Metal Dragons shroud themselves in secrecy and double-dealing from a feeling of necessity, the Elemental

Dragons do so because that is the way things are done. One does not, after all, show or explain one's deeds. One merely watches the results.

The walls of secrecy began to fall in the early 20th century, when the Zaibatsu made their existence as a separate group openly known. Even then, however, the group was dismissed as merely "the Japanese branch of the Technocracy." The Zaibatsu were assumed to be members of the New World Order or perhaps Iteration X, perhaps both — certainly funded by the Syndicate and certainly not independent. And if the connections were sometimes difficult to trace — well, the Technocracy had to keep some secrets, of course.

Occasionally, a few agents from the other organizations — or their shen-hunting groups — did break the silence, admitting responsibility for certain actions. In the late 1970s, a few agents of the Taiping Tianguo admitted to "assisting" North Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War — an admission followed immediately by the assertion that they had done so on the orders of the Syndicate. And in the 1990s, four agents of the New World Order felt impelled to leave China, although they could not give a satisfactory reason for their departure. Most of the actions of the Elemental Dragons, however, remained shrouded in secrecy, a secrecy partly maintained by the mental powers of the Miao Guan.

Only now, at the turn of the century, have the Elemental Dragons begun to reveal themselves openly as several different organizations, each with its own interests and policies. It is unknown how much the Elemental Dragons follow the Convention War — or whether the recent end to this war affected their decision to come into the open. Certain agents outside the organization have speculated that the mysterious Miao Guan, peacekeepers of the Elemental Dragons, can no longer maintain the mental walls and shields that protected the Dragons from detection for so long. Others shudder at this idea. For 2000-year-old conspiracies do not fall so easily....

ELEMENTAL DRAGONS VERSUS METAL DRAGONS

Many Chi'n Ta refer to the Asian Technocrats as the "Five Metal Dragons," and draw no distinction between the Stone People from Europe and their Asiatic counterparts. (Indeed, in this very book, you'll find references to the Five Metal Dragons as the Asian Technocracy.) The Elemental Dragons prefer this state of affairs — so long as their adversaries consider them something other than they *really* are, they can conceal their true goals.

The Elemental Dragons infiltrate Western Technocracy agencies, pretend to be Technocratic operatives and in many cases seem to have goals that coincide with the Technocracy's agenda, if perhaps with a cultural twist. In truth, the Elemental Dragons have their own goals and are happy to let the Five Metal Dragons — the Western Technocrats, or even unsuspecting Asians who join the Technocracy — think that the Elemental Dragons are mere extensions of their own organization, absorbed during the allegiances of craftsmen and cultural students from previous centuries.

Such a conspiracy results in a confusing state of affairs. An Elemental Dragon could very well be recognized as a member of, say, the New World Order, and the NWO might consider her a valid operative. Her own cultural predilections and traditional peccadilloes fall simply in the category of personal foibles or hobbies. For her part, conversely, the operative pursues the goals of the Elemental Dragons and considers the Technocracy merely another organization to infiltrate and manipulate for her ends. Miao Guan mental conditioning allows agents to evade and surpass periodic Technocracy evaluations, and in many cases the agents *do* honestly find a coinciding interest between Metal Dragons and Elemental Dragons. Still, no true Elemental Dragon would *ever* stoop to thinking of herself solely as a Technocrat. To the Elemental Dragons, the Five Metal Dragons are upstarts who have fostered technologies that they don't completely understand and destructive social constructs, but their techniques *might* be turned to useful results — barbarians with potent toys, if you will.

ELEMENTAL HISTORY



Long before any Westerner drew a single breath of reason, the Elemental Dragons were already guarding and sustaining the forces of reason and order. Historians of the Zaibatsu laugh at Iteration X's claims to supremacy, pointing out that the first fires were tamed along the shores of China's Yellow River and the first pots molded near modern Osaka, in Japan. The Elemental Dragons were the first to explore the possibilities of the

new way of molding energy — agriculture. But as these innovators gained control of the forces of nature, they discovered that nature's powers doubled back upon those who tamed them.

Many who stoked the fires and shaped the pots could see *other* things. They could look at the earth and the sky and see the flowing energies they contained, energies that caused wildfires, earthquakes and the great ocean winds. Legend tells how these people named themselves Dragons, gathered together and created a world of harmony and order

in the Middle Kingdom, the center of peace and civilization. Each Dragon felt the call of a specific element, and slowly, the Dragons separated, each guarding a specific element and area of the Middle Kingdom, yet all working together in harmony.

Legend lies.

The Dragons did push the Middle Kingdoms—central China, Japan, Korea and parts of Southeast Asia, toward civilization and order. In central China, those who became the Zi Guang noticed that the rice plant, excellent for eating, could be encouraged to grow in certain areas and along certain lines. In Japan, those who became the Zaibatsu tamed fire, and those who became the Saensaeng began to mold the very earth itself into pottery and buildings, shaping a world of art. As the years passed, the Dragons created a world of harmony and order—or, rather, one might say tiny little worlds, each straining towards order, not yet having learned that order cannot be forced but only aided in its course.

Yet, their imperfect order existed within a world of chaos. In the steppes of northern China, the high peaks of Tibet and the jungles of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, the forces of chaos constantly threatened the harmony of the Middle Kingdoms from without. Even inside the Middle Kingdoms, occasional riots and rebellions flared up. Expeditions to subjugate other provinces led China into warfare, while famine or civil strife gave rise to internal disputes and philosophical schisms in Japan and Tibet. Most Dragons regarded this with near complacency, believing that this chaos provided a necessary balance: Without chaos to balance the order, order could not exist. Better that some exist in utter chaos than to lose all order completely.

But the final fall of the Cambodian Khmer Empire and the Mongol invasions in the 14th century, leaving only chaos in their wake, proved that this balance was hardly being kept. During the following centuries, the disorder and chaos only increased. And a new threat appeared: the gweilo, or gaijin—the Westerners. In the 16th century, they descended into the Middle Kingdom in great numbers, introducing new technologies with no thought for the consequences and spreading dissension everywhere they went. To the horror of the Elemental Dragons, some even placed the importance of the individual over that of the group.

The various Dragons reacted to the overwhelming chaos in various ways. In Japan, the Court of the Chrysanthemums and the Court of the Plum Blossoms shut their doors against all outsiders, Eastern or Western, except in a small, unimportant trading town named Nagasaki. On the mainland, unfortunately, borders could not be shut so easily, and the Dragons searched for other solutions. Some blamed the shen, and began hunting down every shen that could be found. Others blamed two previously unimportant

groups: the Wu Lung and the Akashic Brotherhood. Both had previously aided the forces of order, but now their stagnant beliefs prevented humanity from progressing along its natural course. Their dangerous methods of handling Chi not only threatened the common people but added to the growing chaos. If these false worshippers of order could be driven from the Middle Kingdom, perhaps order would return, indeed.

Unfortunately, both groups proved rather harder to drive out than anticipated. Other users of Chi—the maddened White Lotus Women, who spread chaos in their wake; the Wu-Keng, who sent the very trees after those who tried to destroy them, and many of the little-known shen—aided the chaos seekers in their stubborn refusal to do what was best for community and kingdom.

In their struggles with internal chaos, the Elemental Dragons welcomed the aid of the European Order of Reason. They should not be blamed for failing to foresee the results. The European practitioners proved to be more interested in money than in order. In their quest for gold, opium and silk, they deliberately led several Chinese into addiction to fund their ever superior technologies, which they then used against the very people they addicted. Guns and swords, cultural ideology and church supremacy prevailed over diplomacy or efforts at conciliation. The Order of Reason and its agents pushed the Elemental Dragons from power in Southeast Asia, setting up their own successful trade networks—networks benefiting only the gweilo.

The Dragons, seeing this, began desperately trying to modernize Asia. In Japan, the Court of the Plum Blossoms encouraged the successful Meiji Revolution, transforming Japan from a medieval culture to one of the world's most modern states within twenty-five years. But outside Japan, their efforts came too little, too late. The Elemental Dragons strove helplessly against the superior technology of the Technocracy. The Elemental Dragons enjoyed a certain success; the Metal Dragons were never able to penetrate China deeply. But the Metal Dragons did entrench themselves in Southeast Asia, remaining there to this day.

World War II set the Dragons at each other's throats; the resulting chaos remains a dark memory for older Dragons. After the fires of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, older Dragons met in an unprecedented joint conference and agreed to return to their ancient belief in order and peace. In an effort to shed their past, many Dragons rejected the old names, creating modern identities. The Court of the Chrysanthemums, now the Saensaeng, remained hidden in Japan, in the shadows of the now almost powerless imperial court, moving the bulk of their members to Korea. The Zaibatsu took control in Japan; the Taiping Tianguo retreated to Taiwan and Hong Kong; the Miao Guan and Zi Guang together struggled to bring peace to China. In an almost unprecedented move, the Dragons united briefly to eradicate every Western Progenitor

and Iteration X agent in China, groups now blamed for the excesses at such places of horror as Nanking. It is worth noting that both the Progenitors and Iteration X vehemently deny any involvement in the massacres and medical experiments that took place there during the war. The Elemental Dragons, however, remained unconvinced, and drove the groups out. Today, while Iteration X claims to have a large power base in China and to control much of the country's politics, in reality, only one or two agents actually live in the area, under close watch. Exactly why Iteration X clings to this belief if not fully understood, although some believe that the mind alteration techniques of the Miao Guan may have something to do with it.

In the following years, three groups of the Dragons, the Taiping Tianguo in Taiwan, the Saensaeng in Korea and the Zaibatsu in Japan built enormously successful financial empires, while in Southeast Asia, the Syndicate, New World Order and Iteration X created enormously successful economies in the "Asian tigers" of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. The New World Order's unsuccessful attempt to overtake Vietnam through the U.S. military is now coordinated by the Syndicate, although many doubt the wisdom of the attempt. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have little to offer to the Technocracy, except as possible new markets for the Zaibatsu's latest toys.

Buoyed by their success, the Elemental Dragons recently turned their attentions to China, where a joint effort of the Miao Guan and Zi Guang had finally brought peace to the troubled nation. The new arrivals were not welcomed; businessmen found themselves overwhelmed by bureaucratic paperwork. Still, slow persistence paid off, with the result that all Five Elemental Dragons and three of the Five Metal Dragons now have at least a minor presence in China.

The success of the Dragons had one unexpected side effect: a growing pool of Chi that proved ever more difficult to control. Two of the Elemental Dragons, the Zaibatsu and the Taiping Tianguo, made controlling Chi, rather than creating order, their main priority. The effects of this have yet to be seen. A secondary side effect may also be the inexplicable actions of many shen, a group that seems to be growing in strength, against all reason.

In recent years, too, the seemingly unassailable forces of economic growth seem to be struggling. The Dragons have been faced with the unspeakable: potential economic depression and stagnation.

MODERN DRAGONS

Applying the ancient and fantastic word "Dragon" to a wizard of the Zaibatsu as he speeds along in his technologically enhanced sports car may seem like a contradiction

CHI VERSUS CHI

In Chinese terms, Chi — "breath" — represents a combination of spiritual life-force and elemental power. (Japanese elements also speak of "ki" in a similar fashion.) For game purposes, of course, we simplify this down quite a bit and turn this into a quantifiable sort of energy.

Astute players will note, though, that we've used "Chi" here in the sense of Quintessence — a permeating energy that can be used to create or destroy — while it's also used in *Kindred of the East* as more of a life-force. How to reconcile the two? Simple — Chi can take many forms. As the Kuei-jin experience, Chi can be scarlet or black (Yang or Yin), taking on specific properties of energetic life or lassitude and death energy. Conversely, the hsien know of Golden Chi, which sparks creativity and wildness. Mages tend to use a different sort of Chi — Quintessence — which is mutable and can take on different characteristics, as shown by its use in magic. Sorcerers, Elemental Dragons and Traditionalists alike can bend Chi to their will.

This is *not* to say that all forms of Chi are interchangeable. Chi can be transformed — living bodies can generate both Black and Scarlet Chi, hsien distill Golden Chi out of dreams, Patterns can change from one type to another — but such transformations do not come easily. A mage can't simply rip the Chi out of a Wan Kuei, nor can a hsien make use of the Chi that a Chi'n Ta channels into his personal Artifacts. Just because it's the same word doesn't mean that all forms of Chi are the same.

in terms. It isn't. The Elemental Dragons believe strongly in combining tradition — the best of the old — with the latest in technology. Thus, a new office building is built according to the latest engineering rules — and follow the centuries-old rules of feng shui, the art of designing buildings so that they exist in harmony with nature. Thus, the word "Dragon," a symbol of tradition, strength, wisdom and order, suits the Asian Technocrats perfectly. If younger members now prefer the modern names developed after World War II, older members still remember and use the terms with pride.

Currently, the Elemental Dragons each oversee a specific area. In theory, the Elemental Dragons work together, along with the Metal Dragons, to bring peace and prosperity to the Asian continent. But as any good scientist will tell you, theory rarely matches practice. The hatred between the Japanese Zaibatsu and their ancient rivals the Saensaeng, now centered in Korea, runs deep, and other

agents nervously eye any meeting between the two. The Zaibatsu blame the Saensaeng for the recent terrorist attacks by the Aum Shinrikyo, while the Saensaeng deplore what they see as the Zaibatsu's embrace of Western culture. The Miao Guan, alone among the Dragons, still regard many technological advances with suspicion and often suspect the Taiping Tianguo of working for the agents of chaos. Only the Zi Guang truly maintain amicable relations with the other groups, and even they view the excesses of the others with suspicion.

Still, the Dragons remain united in at least some respects: in their distrust of the shen, their quest for order, and their quiet, unspoken agreement to rid Southeast Asia

of the Metal Dragons. This agreement is generated less from pan-Asian unity than a feeling ranging from distaste to hatred for the Metal Dragons, widely regarded as inferior creatures without honor.

But no one can deny that the Technocratic Conventions have done extraordinary work in Southeast Asia, smoothly accomplishing all of the Elemental Dragons' goals. Singapore, under the firm control of the Syndicate, remains a Technocratic paradise. Elsewhere, removing the Technocracy is causing more problems than solutions; it is widely speculated that a quiet attempt to remove the Syndicate from Thailand triggered that country's recent recession, a recession that spread to every Asian nation with the exception of Singapore — a Syndicate stronghold.

ORGANIZATION

Since ancient times, the "Order of Reason" in Asia has consisted of five different groups, each with its own beliefs and practices. Each was identified with a particular element for reasons now unknown. Some Dragons claim that discovering these reasons is the key to finding the permanent control of Chi.

The Temple of the Eternal Mountain, or the Wood Dragons, now the Zi Guang, founded rice cultivation, an indication of their concern for the common people. They currently attempt to slow the enormous growth of Chi through discouraging population growth and using inner Chi to improve the human body. Excess Chi is carefully harvested from the un-Awakened and used to power various projects.

The Temple of Heavenly Peace, or the Water Dragons, now the Taiping Tianguo, believe that Chi energy should be allowed to increase at its current rate; the energy, after all, is desperately needed to solve the world's problems. Finding technology strong enough to control the Chi has proven difficult, but only for financial reasons. Enough money can buy anything. The Taiping Tianguo, therefore, works to find enough money, if not to solve their problems, then to turn them into problems that can be solved.

The Court of the Chrysanthemums, or the Earth Dragons, now the Saensaeng, guides South Korea as its agents attempt to keep Asian traditions alive throughout Asia. Only by maintaining order in society, they believe, can the chaos of Chi be controlled. Their Japanese counterparts, by supporting the conservative, anti-Western imperial party, hope to overtake the Zaibatsu, resume power in Japan and halt the dangerous societal changes that have occurred under the Zaibatsu's rule.

The Court of the Plum Blossoms, or the Fire Dragons, now the Zaibatsu, currently resides in Japan. Under the guise of the huge Mikoshi conglomerate and similar tremendous corporate entities, they develop technological products at an

THE GLASS CEILING

It's a man's world out there, sweetheart. This is especially true, ironically, in the countries often considered most Western and modern — Korea, Japan and Taiwan, where women are still struggling to enter lower management in any great numbers. The situation in other Asian countries is somewhat better. In Hong Kong and Thailand, for example, women occupy a number of high-ranking positions, even if most of these positions are filled by men. Communist China has managed to reverse a millennia old tradition of subjugating women, allowing women to enter the workforce as, if not quite equal to males, at least with some degree of independence. The daily onslaught of American culture and TV is weakening the barriers in other lands as well. A few women have even slipped into the higher ranks of the Dragons, especially among the Zi Guang, although such women are still unusual enough to arouse comments.

Still, the majority of Asian women are encouraged to stay at home, fulfilling "traditional" female roles. When they venture outside the home, their jobs center around more submissive roles, taking jobs in the service industry or in secretarial roles.

This is not to say that women cannot rise in the Asian corporate world. Indeed, they can and do in a number of creative ways. Several women head overseas, to collect impressive degrees, work experiences and foreign language skills; the resulting package is often so attractive that only the most sexist of male corporate executives can resist them. Many Dragons have followed their example, working as field agents in Europe and the United States. In these less sexist areas, their success has been astounding; most have garnered higher results than their male counterparts.

Yet female agents returning from the most successful of overseas assignments still face the same stereotypes — which is why many turn around and head back overseas a few days after arriving. Female Technocracy characters in Asia should expect similar sexism.

enormous rate, hoping to control the ever-growing amounts of Chi through their technologies.

The Temple of the Eternal Harmonies, or the Spirit Dragons, now the Miao Guan, is uncomfortable with the latest technologies, preferring to study a new invention's effects elsewhere before allowing it inside its borders. It has deliberately kept the technological level in China at the lowest possible level, although recent efforts by the Taiping Tianguo are changing this trend. But if the Miao Guan is uncomfortable with technology, it is by far the most comfortable with order and community.

No group represents the true fifth element of Chinese lore, metal. Speculations about this abound. Some claim that the Wu Lung, or Dragon Wizards, represent the metal element, a puzzling speculation, as little about the Wu Lung suggests this. Others believe that the Miao Guan used to represent the element of metal, but their cautious attitude towards modern technology seems to contradict this. Finally, others suggest that the Western Technocracy may represent the element of metal; thus the nickname the Metal Dragons.

Despite their differences, all Elemental Dragons agree on the importance of two overriding goals: controlling Chi, and maintaining order. In a changing world, they are the forces of reason and balance, and the only people who can prevent chaos from overtaking the world. Changing too much too quickly brings chaos — thus the importance of maintaining tradition whenever possible. Chi must be controlled, and greater amounts require greater technologies. Changes in technology already threaten to bring chaos; it is thus vital to keep as many traditions strong as possible.

Developing technology and maintaining tradition at the same time is too much for any one organization. Thus, the Elemental Dragons have split their duties among themselves. The Saensaeng rigidly guard tradition, maintaining respect for elders and wisdom. The Miao Guan bend their energies toward maintaining peace in Asia at any cost; no one can afford another World War II. The lives of a few Vietnamese, Koreans and students are a small price to pay. The Zaibatsu focus on developing new technologies to control Chi and improving communication and transportation. The Taiping Tianguo works to make sure all of these exciting tools can be paid for, as they develop their own technological wonders. And the Zi Guang uses Chi to create superior human beings.

What their rivals are doing with Chi in Southeast Asia remains a matter of dispute.

THE METAL DRAGONS

From the files of Keita Tokagawa; date and sender deleted.

Got your e-mail. I'll see what I can do to answer some of your questions.

Yes, as you guessed, I'm a member of one of these Conventions — and, since I've told you that, this message will self destruct in 30 seconds! Ha, ha. No, seriously, we're not really as top secret as all that. Basically, I'm here as kinda the American representative to Asia — helping to keep an eye on things and making sure that progress happens smoothly and doesn't upset other interests. And to keep the lines of lines of communications open.

Don't get overexcited, though, and assume that every American or Westerner you see is one of us. Actually, most that you run into are exactly what they seem — ordinary American corporate executives or tourists. I'm not saying that someone behind the scenes might not be interested in what these ordinary people are doing — but to go from that to assuming that all American businesspeople are controlled by the Syndicate or the New World Order is a bit of a stretch. You're getting way too paranoid.

As far as I know, the Western Conventions have only three Enlightened representatives in Japan, four in China and one in Korea — this out of maybe two million or more Westerners in those countries. Generally speaking, the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans send their agents to us. The guy on the Syndicate board, for example — Andre Takahasi, I think his name was, was actually one of your guys, I understand. Of course, I understand that the NWO and the Syndicate are a lot more active in Southeast Asia — heck, for all intents and purposes, Singapore is the Syndicate. And I have heard rumors that the Void Engineers are actively seeking both Chinese and Western recruits for that base they run near Hangzhou. The Progenitors have set up a large set of laboratories in Thailand and Indonesia. I heard that they're supposedly not allowed in China after that Nanking incident — emphasis on "supposedly." Wouldn't surprise me if they actually had some secret base there.

But even in Southeast Asia, most of the Technocrats that you meet are Asians, not Westerners. And nobody in Southeast Asia blindly follows orders from American supervisors. Basically, any Western control, even there, is totally on the surface.

I mean, take Coke as one example. Sure, the signs are up everywhere — you can't turn around without seeing an ad for Coke. But turn into an alley and what are people actually drinking? Green tea — the same java they've been downing for thousands of years. Don't let all the Western advertising and culture fool you. It might cover the surface, but it sure hasn't penetrated beneath it. The Asian Technocracy is run by Asians.

See ya at the Trafalgar Pub on Saturday, ok?

INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

The organization of the Zaibatsu and Taiping Tianguo mirrors that of major corporations, with a corporate board, CEO, vice presidents, and a strict internal structure, right down to the un-Awakened janitors, who

generally know of the Dragons' existence, if little more. Both organizations contain a number of un-Awakened agents and workers, all of whom willingly endure deep post-hypnotic conditioning to prevent them from revealing any corporate secrets.

Technically, the companies owned by the Zaibatsu and the Taiping Tianguo are traded on the open stock market; in reality, of course, agents keep a strict control over all corporate developments, keeping a careful eye on which products are produced and when, and tweaking their respective stock markets at appropriate times.

The Zi Guang follow a pyramid structure, with one leader at the top (always male), three underneath him, nine under them, twenty-seven underneath them and so forth. Members rise only when a position opens above them. The Saensaeng, still proud of their warlike past, maintain elements of that system; all members receive military ranks and rise according to these ranks. Four generals lead the Saensaeng; the number of other officers varies according the available talent. The Miao Guan subdivides members into individual cells consisting of three to ten agents. Cells generally choose and develop their own projects, under the guidance of the main cell in Beijing.

Members rise not through individual achievements but through their ability to work with groups. Outside of the Taiping Tianguo, rogue and independent agents are more than frowned upon; most can expect termination — ultimate termination. Of course, one or two agents do find themselves forced to work outside of the system once or twice — assuming, of course, that they can keep these activities safely hidden from the mental probes of the Miao Guan. In the direst of emergencies, an agent may work by herself, but most lone agents met in the field are actually part of a group.

Information about the organization of the Metal Dragons can be found in the **Guide to the Technocracy**.

HARVESTING CHI

Of course, all of this — creating new technologies, guiding the Masses towards a world of harmony and order, and protecting them from dangerous shen takes energy, and a lot of it. Fortunately, the Elemental Dragons are masters at finding, creating and exploiting these energy sources.

The Water Dragons find most Chi sources in water and in land, and, more recently, in atomic energy projects. They work to build machines capable of increasing Chi energy (to the alarm of the other Dragons), although, as the Water Dragons point out, such energy is used solely to power technological machines and not dispersed into the land, where it may cause several potential earthquakes and other problems.

Chi may also be found in human bodies; the vast Asian population creates an excess of Chi carefully harvested by

the Zi Guang to prevent large fluctuations from harming the population. Chi can also be harvested from the shen, a process used particularly by the Zaibatsu, who bend their energies toward eliminating these deadly creatures. Zaibatsu corporations not only build consumer projects but fund the secretive Strike Force Zero (see **Demon Hunter X**) and encourage operatives to root out and destroy the shen who prey upon the human populace and upset the balance of Chi.

The Miao Guan have never revealed their sources of Chi, but most agents believe that they harvest Chi either from the ground, like the Saensaeng, or from human bodies, as do the Zi Guang.

Unfortunately, some of the greatest sources of Chi on the continent remain uncontrolled. The Zi Guang and Miao Guan are desperately bending their energies to understand and control the oddly fluctuating but tremendously powerful energies found in Tibet. Most recently, in July 1999, several neutron bombs exploding in India caused enormous Chi fluctuations and weather disruptions. This sobering incident has reminded all agents to use certain technologies with extreme caution.

FINANCE

Blasting away shen might be a lot of fun, but somebody's got to pay for it. The Elemental Dragons, recognizing this, have set up one of the world's most spectacularly successful financial networks.

Business, however, is conducted Asian style, and young agents need some familiarity with the basic rules. The first, and perhaps the most important, is absolute respect and obedience to superiors. The second, equally important, is belief that conducting trade takes both time and silence. Few Asian executives conduct business directly. Instead, projects are discussed behind closed doors and over long time periods. Wrapping up business deals in Asia takes patience.

The preferred method inside corporate ranks is nemawashi, the ability to have your projects approved before any formal approval. During the nemawashi process, an executive quietly approaches inferiors to research their opinions on the proposed project. Even one slight negative at this stage dooms the project. If, however, the inferiors seem either pleased or indifferent to the idea (indifference being the far more likely response) the executive may then proceed to speak to superiors. Every superior must approve the project informally before any formal proposals are made. In most cases, the executive who initialized the project isn't involved in this formal presentation and must instead wait to hear from her boss. If her nemawashi has been poor, the project is rejected; no manager approves a project that his subordinates have already turned down. Failure to follow nemawashi

properly dooms any eager young agent trying to impress superiors or accomplish anything.

Projects done outside the firm are usually conducted with the aid of xuanxi, or connections. This is especially true in China, where, without xuanxi, nothing can be done at all. A foreigner — any foreigner — entering this area without any xuanxi finds herself stymied at every turn, met by smiling imperturbable faces, and buried in incomprehensible paperwork. Please note that “foreigner” here means anyone outside the local area — an agent from Shanghai is a foreigner in Beijing, and vice versa.

ETIQUETTE

Even the most modern corporate executives still follow rigid patterns of etiquette, especially when dealing with superiors or inferiors. Throughout Asia, the rigid class system of earlier centuries has been transformed to the current corporate culture, where etiquette is the key to survival.

In practical terms, this means that inferiors are expected to show absolute deference to superiors, bowing and carrying out all orders immediately. Problems are discussed very discretely indeed, in whispers and behind closed doors, when done at all; most employees who have problems with their bosses never say a word. Most importantly, inferiors are not expected to approach a superior directly; they wait for the superior to approach them. A character angrily confronting a boss will be shunned if Western; if Asian, the character has committed a crime as embarrassing as theft and is punished and ostracized accordingly. People have lost jobs and joined the ranks of the permanently unemployed for less.

Most Western characters are presumed ignorant, and may be forgiven certain faux pas. Asian characters, however, are best advised to use nemawashi when confronting a superior.

The benefits of this system are self-evident. Player characters may expect almost complete, even blind, obedience, from their inferiors. On the downside, superiors demand the same obedience, even in life threatening situations. Failure to do so brings, at the least, great shame to characters and quite possibly unemployment.

Outside of the corporate structure, Western characters are automatically considered barbarians, and are forgiven all but the most disastrous of errors — bringing soap into a Japanese bath, for example. Asian characters can be assumed to know the customs of their own countries; when traveling outside the local area, however, they are advised to research local customs carefully, to avoid giving offense.

Finally, players and Storytellers alike should note that the distinction between private and personal life is still strong in Asia. Players who ask about or discuss significant others in the workplace will find themselves greeted by blank, unhelpful looks — no matter how suspicious the very attractive redhead who's been sitting with him at the local bar and apparently collecting a CD or two from him has been.

Themselves experts in paperwork and persuasion, many Elemental Dragons have mastered the skill of xuanxi. A particular connection — the right person in the right place — allows certain bureaucratic troubles to disappear almost by magic. Using xuanxi, the Elemental Dragons have had even the most improbable projects approved — damming up the Yangtze River, for example.

Xuanxi carries a price. Favors must be repaid, either with a bribe of appropriate size or with a larger favor. Thus, both parties remain indebted, building up xuanxi to each other.

CURRENT PROBLEMS

Aside from their difficulties with the Technocracy, the Elemental Dragons have internal problems as well. Asiatic countries have adjusted only roughly to the pressures of Western technology. In many cases, the attempt to merge European thinking with Asian tradition creates conflict — witness the difficulties of a gaijin who walks into an Asian bar and doesn't realize that there's an additional charge just for speaking with the hostesses. The Elemental Dragons must juggle not only external relations with the Technocracy but internal problems as Asia absorbs the culture of Europe.

CRIME

The Sokkaiya, often mistransliterated into English as the Yazuka, maintain a stranglehold over all Japanese crime. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The Sokkaiya forbid their members to commit any crime less than a major, high-profit felony. Why bother with a simple mugging bringing in perhaps 10,000 yen when a nice bit of industrial espionage might net millions? The result: Japanese citizens can safely walk the streets without fear of muggers (usually), and in the evening, be entertained by the latest scandal of a government official receiving bribes from his Sokkaiya mistress.

While the Sokkaiya are not, strictly speaking, members of the Technocracy, the top members are aware of its existence and actively assist the Zaibatsu in keeping the gaijin out. In response, the NWO, which owns and controls the influential English periodical the *Japan Sun*, has reputedly ordered its reporters to seek out and publish every instance of Sokkaiya corruption. The extent of such corruption has surprised even the NWO; not a day passes without some fresh scandal or fallen bodies. Some Japanese mutter that not even the Sokkaiya can be so bad — and eye the English papers with suspicion. This perhaps explains the notable failure of the Sokkaiya to stop the English presses. With other, more mundane, organizations, the Sokkaiya are swift and direct: Nothing stops a financial bungler faster than a drop from a 40-story window, and the Sokkaiya are, above all else, brutally efficient.

Chinese Tongs, on the other hand, are little more than street gangs, specializing in petty, brutal crimes. Persistent rumors among both Western and Asian Technocrats suggest that the Syndicate controls the Tongs — or at least provides them with seed money — remain unproven. Indeed, as representatives of the Syndicate in Singapore point out calmly, doing so is counterproductive. Organized crime needs to be just that, organized — a word that can hardly be applied to the Tongs. The Syndicate also denies any involvement with the better organized Triads that imitate the Sokkaiya in their less successful efforts at controlling crime. Indeed, from all appearances, the Triads appear to be among the Syndicate's greatest nuisances. By some odd coincidence, a Chinese Triad always seems to attack or threaten the Syndicate's latest project.

Both Tongs and Triads roam China and Southeast Asia freely, terrorizing local inhabitants. The Elemental Dragons' avowed plans to remove the Tongs from existence has caused many shen to look at the "Asian Technocrats" with a kinder eye, though of course some shen see the criminal elements as useful pawns for their own schemes. Sporadic battles of influence flare when the Dragons push

to eliminate or control the Tongs and Triads, while other shen fight for their own influence.

ECONOMIC DISRUPTION

The unthinkable is happening. Depression is coming to Asia. The economic monolith may be crumbling. Nor is this only a minor downturn. In many countries, people are taking the streets in protest — and riots are always bad for business.

A rare unified effort kept the Asian tigers from complete bankruptcy in 1998 and 1999, and the banks of the Syndicate and the Taiping Tianguo seem to have settled somewhat at last. But fires still rage in Indonesia.

No Dragon, Western or Eastern, has an explanation for this vexing phenomenon, although some have turned suspicious eyes towards the Syndicate, whose stronghold in Singapore seems nearly untouched. But the depression is affecting the Syndicate's business interests as well, and their denials of involvement seem genuine. Something else must be causing the troubles — and exactly what that might be has sent shivers of fear running through the highest ranks of the Technocracy.



CHAOS

As the cycles of uncertainty increase in frequency, the Elemental Dragons search for causes. The increase in Chi flows, especially in the undirected and hectic lifestyles promoted by the Technocracy, cause concomitantly dissolute events. The teeming Masses, oblivious to the world's natural balance, and the Chi flows bent unwholesomely through technology or renegade magic, lead to unhealthy cankers in the world's natural cycles. The swarms of people in China's teeming cities like Beijing cause increasingly uncontrollable perturbations of life force. The result, of course, is that Chi itself spirals out of the Elemental Dragons' control. Economic crashes, natural disasters and increasing depredations of marauding shen are merely symptoms, the Dragons believe. Unless control can be retaken soon, the world may suffer a correction induced by too much energetic, frenetic motion of Yang and excessive destruction and death promoted by Yin.

THE GENERATION GAP

For millennia, the elders of the Elemental Dragons maintained a rigid hierarchy given the devoted loyalty and respect due elders in Asian society. Now this loyalty weakens. Following current social trends, many younger agents are beginning to speak against their elders. Granted, they are only speaking in whispers, but even a whisper is far louder than the previous silence.

Younger agents have also begun to object to the mind techniques of the Miao Guan, especially those used to monitor the moods of crowds or even to alter them. A few agents among the Taiping Tianguo have begun to defend the rights of certain shen to exist — a trend noted with alarm by the Zaibatsu. And a story of two younger agents fleeing the Saensaeng to join the Void Engineers persists despite all attempts to quash it.

Some Elemental Dragons blame American movies and television for this alarming trend and are rushing to create their own entertainment stressing the need for all to respect their superior, as well as urging the New World Order to change the trend of American movies. So far, the New World Order has not responded to this suggestion. Other Dragons argue that such narrow visions are foolish — American movies do not reshape Asiatic culture any more than rock music or roleplaying games. Many Elemental Dragons stress inward discipline, and instead of trying to reshape all Asiatic culture instead focus on the training of new recruits. By instilling a respect for authority and a Confucian attitude toward the hierarchy, the Dragons hope to cause new recruits to absorb loyalty along with their mystic training.

Alas, modern pressures continue to erode the structure of the Elemental Dragons. Increasingly, promising agents travel abroad and return with very different personal views about what constitutes efficient or proper reaction to the

crises facing Asia. Educated by Technocratic principles, they absorb the ideals of a culture driven not by tradition or adherence to Chi flows, but rather a scientific worldview and a hierarchy dominated by personal excellence, not tradition. Ancient Dragons, respected for their wisdom, have disappeared in the Mists of Heaven, never to be seen again, further dividing the schisms between traditionalists and modern agents. Uncharacteristic divisiveness sets in and allows heretofore unthinkable errors: Agents who scoff at feng shui, who believe in compromise with shen or who found their own organizations instead of following the lead of their elders. Truly, the new Age bears hardship for the Dragons.

THE FORCES OF MADNESS

Madness and chaos has always existed in one form or another throughout Asia, despite the Miao Guan's constant efforts to halt it. Now, however, these forces of madness seem to be growing, with various Sleepers suddenly screaming out in the streets, murdering others without reason or destroying property wantonly. As destructive forces, these are of course to be feared, but as a growing contingent argues, they are perhaps controllable or useful if they can be directed against hostile elements. The Elemental Dragons have long harnessed Chi to prevent or direct natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and lightning; perhaps the chaos engendered in stock market crashes and sociopathic killers can be similarly controlled. Conservative agents argue that such forces must be minimized, for chaos too easily spins away from its initial intent, but experimentation continues.

Some nervous agents even claim that a few of the Western Marauders may have gained access to the ranks of the Taiping Tianguo. Exactly how this might have occurred remains a mystery, since by all accounts the Taiping Tianguo choose their agents as carefully, as do the other Dragons. Of course, this implies that a careful watch should be kept on the other Dragons as well.

Marauders in Asia, much like mages scattered everywhere, tend to espouse their own personal forms of mystic insanity. The Elemental Dragons remain convinced that such manifestations stem from damaged Chi flows or improper balance. Some Dragons posit that Marauder conditions may be curable with a proper regimen of technological treatment in a therapeutic (read: Chi-controlled) environment. So far, there's no direct proof of this potential treatment, but a few Dragons hope to make strides in this area in conjunction with the Technocracy's usual efforts to capture and analyze Marauders.

THE SHEN AND THE ELEMENTAL DRAGONS

Asia abounds with shen — supernatural creatures such as the Wan Kuei, the vampires returned from hell; the hengeyokai, or shapechangers; the hsien, caretakers

of prayer and heavenly messengers; and other spirit folk — gods, demons and ghosts. The uncontrollable shen bring danger and chaos to the lives of every person in Asia. The Elemental Dragons plan to change this — as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the Elemental Dragons do not have enough numbers to annihilate the shen completely. A partial effort, they fear, only brings down the united wrath of the shen upon them. Most, therefore, avoid confronting any shen directly, instead sending un-Awakened agents out to confront particularly dangerous shen threats. The Japanese Strike Force Zero is but the best known of these organizations; more obscure groups include the Korean Anyonghi Ka, Singapore's Agency 99, and China's Red Fingers. The Technocrats (Eastern and Western) provide the best of training and weaponry to these elite strike forces and reward them well.

Some threats, of course, are beyond the power of the un-Awakened to handle. In situations of particular danger, the Elemental Dragons step in, ready to sacrifice their lives for the common good. Such strike forces are always heavily armed and fully briefed. For safety purposes, agents are forbidden to confront the shen alone. At least one partner, with enhanced agents for protection, is minimal; five is the optimum. Even then, the Dragons hesitate to send agents directly against the shen. Agents are just too valuable to waste, and no Elemental Dragons is stupid enough to underestimate even the weakest seeming shen.

Specific threats, however, must be answered — swiftly. Shen do well to avoid the Dragon's claws.

CHIN TA (PIAGES)

The Dragons, both Elemental and Metal, usually ignore Tradition mages in Asia, as most come only for tourist purposes. The two major exceptions to this rule are only minor irritations. The Akashic Brotherhood are (to the Dragons) almost laughable creatures and would be ignored except for the constant danger created by their ridiculous insistence that Chi may be controlled by body and mind alone. This dangerous belief must be quelled. More troublesome are the Virtual Adepts, whose childish pranks on the Virtual Web have disrupted certain critical operations. As Asia becomes a true juggernaut of international commerce, the strands of communication and computer-moderated trade prove vulnerable to interference from the Web-cruising anarchists. Steps have been taken to limit their access to the Web.

The modern Elemental Dragons know nothing of the Wu-Keng (and would hardly consider the peasants a threat if they did). They do, however, keep a sharp eye on the Wu Lung, whose rituals present a clear danger to the common people and who help other shen in their destructive activities. Fortunately, few Wu Lung exist, and these present only a small problem; the Wu Lung

had their power broken when English imperialism dominated China.

Other magical practitioners present only minor difficulties. Most hide in primitive wilderness areas, which should soon be civilized, thus eliminating most dangers for them. A few dedicated agents do venture into the jungles of Southeast Asia or into the mountain steppes of China to eliminate all potential threats in the area. Such ventures are not officially approved and should be done only during vacation time. More commonly, the Elemental Dragons move into areas where the Technocracy has already spread "civilization," and then quietly take up the reigns of local education, religion and culture. In this manner, the Technocrats remain satisfied that their efforts have stamped out superstition while the Elemental Dragons pursue control over local Chi and simultaneously insure orderly resistance to other supernatural threats; shen find their presence more easily unearthed and tracked in towns that have modernized and among a populace more willing to band against them than to cower in fear before them.

STEREOTYPES

Traditions: People who try to control Chi solely with their minds and dangerous rituals endanger themselves more than they endanger us. Interfere with them only if they interfere with you.

The Five Metal Dragons: Watch. Learn. Surpass.

Marauders: Must be destroyed at all costs.

Nephandi: While we understand that good and evil are but two sides of the same coin, a coin with only one face buys little in any market. Remember, our goal is to increase not only the coins, but also the buying power for all people.

Wu Lung: Fools. Traditions should be followed, not worshipped.

Wu-Keng: Of whom do you speak?

Others: Who knows what is up in the steppes? Will it help you make a faster computer?

SLEEPER POLICIES

Monitoring the population of Asia is difficult at best and impossible at worst. In Asia, the problems of the World of Darkness are tripled and quadrupled. Several countries in the area suffer from periodic famines, while terrible weather has been the scourge of Asia for years — a scourge that the Taiping Tianguo and Zaibatsu are trying frantically to control. The Dragons must spend hours

watching over financial trends, weather conditions, global food supplies, political infighting, terrorist activities and so on. Agents must also spend time repairing the damage caused by foolish shen and Chi'n Ta. It's no wonder that occasionally things slip by — and such slip-ups always increase the workload. And here, the Dragons' need for secrecy often backfires: the loud (and annoying) Chinese Human Rights activists, for example, simply have no idea how difficult it is to keep one and a half billion people peaceful — and no gratitude for the Miao Guan's ongoing efforts in this area, either.

STUDENTS

Education leads to order, illiteracy to chaos. For this reason, the Elemental Dragons struggle to bring literacy to all, Awakened and un-Awakened alike, developing statewide mandatory educational systems, complete with regular exams to test student and teacher progress alike. This testing process also identifies potential Dragon candidates, who correctly answer particular questions scattered through the tests. All candidates are monitored through college and graduate school. Those who Awaken during this period are contacted by mentors, but remain in school. Only after completing a graduate degree (either an MBA or Ph.D.) may the potential candidate enter the ranks of the Dragons officially.

Potential agents are selected from among just about anyone with the power to channel Chi and the dedication to see that it must be harnessed properly. No group

concentrates on natives alone; particularly welcomed are those exiles who return from barbarian lands to embrace their culture. They must be watched, of course, but most have proven to be among the best of agents.

Once admitted into Technocratic ranks, new agents are placed in a rigorous training program, developed by the Miao Guan, to increase both mental and physical abilities. To increase their fitness for the job, most choose to dissolve their personal and family ties completely, undergoing a complete mindwiping program. A distinct side benefit: the mindwiping also removes the potential candidate from the notice of any dangerous shen. The mindwiping program is also run by the Miao Guan, although in recent years the Zaibatsu and the Saensaeng have developed their own programs, somewhat concerned about the possibility of Miao Guan plants and infiltrators in their organizations.

For a Dragon, learning never truly ends. Every ten years, all Elemental Dragons are required either to enter a new academic program or work on a group research project. Several Dragons have earned scores of degrees in this fashion; it's not unusual to meet a Dragon with multiple degrees in the hard sciences topped off with an MBA degree. The Asian Metal Dragons often follow this path as well, earning either a new Ph.D. or MBA degree over every twenty-year period. This requirement stems both from the Asian respect for education and from Asian practicality; even if changes are not approved, they must still be understood.

DRAGONS AND POLICIES



Teko: We managed to download this from the Zaibatsu files — seems to have been one of their annual memos or something. Anyway, this is the Zaibatsu outlook on the current situation. While I wouldn't take any of this as gospel, they do seem to have one hell of a spy network. Still, I've noted a couple of places where things seem wrong, and I've added my comments throughout.

[Translated from the Japanese.]

To: Personnel Levels 1 to 5.

From: Hiro

Re: Strategic situation outline.

Please read the following carefully.

Digital Web:

As in previous years, we see little or no use in the Digital Web. Current research confirms that the few portions of the Digital Web accessible to us offer little useful Chi. Our research also confirms that the Digital Web continues to present a serious safety concern to the Japanese people. We strongly suggest continuing to uphold the firewalls now in place against such safety concerns, and continuing

to limit access to the Web through high hourly prices. These two actions should continue to protect our computer systems.

Teko: Shit, those freaking hackers must have gotten to them too. How else do you explain their complete noninterest in the matter? I've gotta give them credit, though — they've done a better job of keeping those idiots out of computer systems than anyone else out there. Right now the running cost for one hour of Internet access — that's regular Internet access — is about \$30 per person. And even once you've paid that, the Zaibatsu have firewalls up everyplace keeping everyone out of anything remotely interesting.

The way I've heard it, though, there's a lot more access elsewhere, what with cybercafes suddenly popping up all over Asia and so on. And, of course, our guys are a lot less careful about the Digital Web down in Southeast Asia. The way I've heard it, a few of them — and even a few of these Elemental Dragons — the ones calling themselves the Taiping Tianguo — are just pouring energy into the Web to expand it and make use of it. Apparently, they've even had some interesting things jumping out of the Web and into their office, although I can't confirm that. It's another one of massive doublespeak situations.

Outer space:

After careful consideration, we see little future or profit in outer space exploration at this time, although we welcome the research efforts of the Western Convention naming itself the Void Engineers and have sent two agents to keep an eye on its growing efforts in Hangzhou. Rumors that we may be contemplating a rival space exploration of our own are simply that, rumors, as unlikely as the tales that some of our distinguished competitors among the Saensaeng may be contemplating setting up bases to begin the exploration of outer space. We must beg you to consider carefully the history of the Saensaeng, remembering that they were the ones that kept Japan isolated for centuries, lagging behind in the technology that has brought us so much comfort today. Is it likely that they work with the Void Engineers, whom they regard—quite falsely, of course— as deadly rivals?

The Hangzhou base is discussed further below.

Teko: Oh, really? Care to explain that growing base on Hokkaido? Thought we couldn't tell that you and your compadres—I know you claim they're deadly enemies of yours or something—set up all of those protests against U.S. military bases—the very bases that have the ability to keep track of whatever you might be up to? For once, I'm glad the Void Engineers are on our side—I mean, I admit that they get pretty, well, spacey, at times, but they keep a sharp eye on you guys, and in this case, that's gotta be a good thing.

China:

China represents opportunity and necessity. Once the center of civilization and order, China still offers a model of an ordered society—and now, unparalleled economic opportunities for those that can move into its markets quickly and efficiently. We are directing all of our energies towards doing both, and thank our colleagues in the Zi Guang for persuading the Communist Party to loosen some of its trade restrictions. The recent conquest of the Yangtze River by the Taiping Tianguo has granted all agents a tremendous energy source, a source that should be tapped and quickly put to use. We note as well that our colleagues in the Miao Guan have reported great success at restoring the essential calmness.

We have another reason for haste in China—the bubbles of dark *Chi* arising throughout the country, particularly in the city districts. We direct you to Dr. Inoguchi for the more scientific explanation. As far as we have been able to determine, these bubbles of *Chi* do not present any immediate danger to us here; still, any tilt towards chaos is troubling. We strongly suggest rushing our marketing efforts in this area and stepping up the modernization of China.

You will, however, find it difficult to work in China. For reasons that we cannot understand, something in China still works against further increases in technology despite the clear desires of ordinary people for such tech-

nological luxuries. This is not necessarily directed against us; our European and American colleagues report similar problems. Recent suggestions that this may be caused by certain elements in the Zi Guang and the Miao Guan have merit, given the historical reluctance of both of these groups to embrace technology, seeing in it not a force for controlling *Chi*, but a force for change—and thus a force for chaos. We are currently working with agents from both groups to explain the strong disadvantages of such a position and hope to see results soon. Dr. Kenichi's current theory, that the Chinese opposition stems from a small enclave of conservative barbarians in the Mongolian area cannot be supported through any of the available evidence. Nor can the rather hysterical claims of a conspiracy of gaki and hengeyokai made by our American colleagues be taken seriously. Those among us who have made any study in this field assure us that the gaki—or, as they are known in China, the ch'ing shih—are as unable to cooperate in China as they are here. We should add that our operatives in China have never seen any more than two or three shen working together, a finding that confirms our previous beliefs.

An item of note: the small and troubling enclave held by the Void Engineers in Hangzhou. While we welcome the contributions of the Metal Dragons in most instances, recent reports indicate that certain beings may be using this base as an entrance point to our planet. Sightings of various genetically altered creatures, reported in unreliable newspapers in several countries, seem to confirm this hypothesis. We have respectfully asked the Void Engineers to relocate their base. They have responded with the statement that their top scientists consider Hangzhou to be the best place to observe a certain red star that has recently appeared in the sky. We must add that our own scientists have not been able to confirm the existence of this star, and we strongly suspect the Void Engineers of other motivations in placing its mission there. While the exploration of outer space may be a laudable goal, it is a goal best left to the future, after order is firmly created here. We will be continuing our orders for displacement of this potentially dangerous enclave.

Teko: Trust the Zaibatsu to put a simplistic spin on an incredibly complicated situation. First of all, China isn't exactly the seamless megalith everybody likes to think of it as; you can't get over one and a half billion people to be total conformists, no matter how long you've been going at it.

At least I don't think you can.

That said, China's been, well, remarkably orderly—on the surface, that is, ever since that Tiananmen Square incident. There's all kinds of stories about this—one being that Tiananmen Square freaked out every single Technocrat in the world, who couldn't believe that anyone in China could possibly stand against order. After all, they'd been absolutely obedient for years, right?

It's good to know that conflict hasn't totally disappeared.

Oh, and as for that star, it's real. I suspect that they're just a little too frightened to talk about it in public, is all.

Korea:

As we determined several years ago, we see little potential profit in this area. As long as its managers continue to maintain order in this once barbaric wasteland, we suggest remaining outside its borders.

Teko: Sounds like they know as much about North Korea as we do. The way I heard it, North Korea's actually influenced by a branch of the Zi Guang — a really sick branch of the Zi Guang at that. Rumor has it that they're actually siphoning off part of the basic Chi that everyone needs just to live. That's supposedly why the whole population's remaining so quiet despite all of the constant famines and so on. It might even be what's causing the famine in the first place — although nobody really seems to know.

The real question, of course, is what they're doing with all that extra Chi. And that's something that no one seems to know. And apparently everybody — agent, Chi'n Ta, shen — who goes there to find out ends up rather messily dead.

I say we follow the Zaibatsu's lead here and don't explore much further, 'k? Leave that to some of our more suicidal friends for now. As you see, we've got other pressing issues elsewhere.

Japan:

Our recent setbacks in the early 1990's have been alleviated by last year's 213% increase in profits. Specifically....

Teko: I cut the rest of this off — it's about as informative as any badly written year-end report would be. Suffice to say that Japan started out as their little wet dream, but it's slowly sliding downhill. The Japanese have a heavily mixed culture, what with their attempts to Westernize and the ensuing backlash, which means that their hybrid sociology isn't easily controlled. The attempt at an unbreakable market failed, the high-tech industries are starting to move to the Third World in the face of globalization — looks like Japan isn't the paradise that they'd originally hoped.

Me, I'm wondering who's gonna take the blame for it.

Taiwan:

The Taiping Tianguo has this area under control. While in the long run this may well be beneficial to the Masses, you should be aware that the Water Dragons are considered to be loose cannons, to borrow an American term. Recent reports of certain — disturbing — elements seem most likely to be the work of native shen. Economic progress is erratic, but the area suffers from less chaotic elements than the recent Japanese economy. Recommend further development, though there is no call for excessive resource use.

Teko: "Little cousin of Japan, so ignore it." I have a feeling that Taiwan may well become a staging ground for elements that run counter to the Dragons. After all, if they're not gonna pay attention...

Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan:

Areas of great Chi, too much to be handled safely at this time. We understand that our colleagues among the Miao Guan are working as swiftly as they can to convince the Chi'n Ta of the area to remove to less contested locales. Fortunately, local shen activity remains minimal; however, rogue elements are strong in this area — so-called yeti sightings and similar myths continue to plague operations. Chi control techniques and technologies must work under extreme care due to chaotic effects that manifest in these regions.

Teko: CONVINCE? Is that what you're calling it? Man, if you hear about some of the infighting that goes on between, say, Akashic Brothers and government elements, you'd think that the war for Tibet never ended. I think I'll just stay the hell away, enlightenment or no.

Some mystical buddies of mine claim that Tibet has a special locational correspondence that makes it too important for humans to control it, at least with the techniques that the Dragons use.

Thailand:

Recent setbacks in Thailand are forcing all agencies to drastically reconsider their ongoing projects there. Some projects remain viable, including the Taiping Tianguo's ongoing dam projects — an offshoot of their work in the Yangtze River in China — and the Zi Guang's work with sex workers in the Bangkok area. Others, however, have had difficulties due to the local influence of excessively unbalanced Chi. Influence through morality continues to show little progress. Chaotic social theory cannot reach a conclusive analysis of whether the area will continue to prosper due to loosened restrictions or simply collapse.

We recommend restricting financial support in this area.

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam:

Excellent training areas for new agents. Filled with several different locales, shen, postwar environments but only limited Chi'n Ta influence, these places offer the opportunity for field agents to hone their skills against poorly organized opponents.

These areas have also proven to be superb places to try out new weapons, although Dr. Okoto's recent experience there reminds us to check the area's energy sources most carefully before trying to use a new Chi-powered neutron detonator. Several pools of Chi have been carefully concealed by other agencies and may prove dangerous to unsuspecting agents who do not first thoroughly check the area.

We should also note that from a financial point of view, these areas have proven remarkably successful. Labor costs are notably low, corporate taxes practically nonexistent and governments remarkably eager to assist

all new businesses. And the growing competition can only serve to sharpen the corporate talents of our new agents.

Teko: Man, they aren't kidding about the training area and weapons testing part. I was tracking down one group in Laos and I couldn't believe what they ran those poor kids through there — no wonder the Zaibatsu and Strike Force Zero are among the best of the bunch. I saw them throw five new agents — total newbies — into a jungle telling them to head out and clear out these ten Kuei-jin who were playing total hell with a local village. And damn if they didn't do it — kinda destroying a third of the forest on the way, of course, and kinda losing their minds and parts of their bodies in the process too. I heard that two of them were sent up to that top secret site in China to have their minds totally rebuilt — at the expense of the very grateful village. And there's more out there — nobody knows what those jungles are hiding.

Indonesia and Malaysia:

It should be noted that the Chi in these areas tends to be of the most turbulent and chaotic kind, notoriously difficult to control even with our very latest technology. Our colleagues in the Miao Guan have speculated that these turbulent energies may also be affecting the mental stability of the inhabitants, who continue to wage frequent disruptions and civil wars. Our own agents report frequent headaches and irritability after remaining for any length of time within the area, and we note as well that the Taiping Tianguo, self-proclaimed masters at controlling chaotic Chi, report problems in the area.

Fortunately, current forest displacement plans are proving to be most effective in eliminating many of these turbulent areas, as well as providing more rice fields to combat some of the area's growing hunger problems. And such an abundance of Chi, however chaotic, must not be ignored or overlooked. The area remains one of our top priorities for expansion in the coming years.

Teko: What is it with these people and jungles, man? Can't they creep out of their holes long enough to smell the trees? But they have a point here. Sure, the resorts are lovely, but underneath them, this place is weird — and that's assuming you don't get caught up in the weekly riots. Great spot for tree-loving types who like to moon at jungles and lost temples, but damn, it's a war zone whether you're a tourist or a magician.

New Guinea:

Research confirms our initial reports. This area is not worth further investigation or time, and we strongly recommend that the two agents currently assigned to the area be removed. We are making the same suggestion to other agencies that may be interested in the area.

Teko: Again, gotta give them credit for being on the right track here. Absolutely nothing here — no power, no money, no nothing, just the occasional rich tourists dropping in to go on treks and watch a couple million people growing vegetables,

a couple of million people who somehow managed to completely avoid outside contact until this century. Oh, yeah, and watching a couple of thousand of those people dancing about while just offshore a couple of oil tankers suddenly start to have significant problems. And just a few fires in really odd and convenient times and places — unless you're still believing that slash and burn theory. The way I see it, most of the Elemental Dragons have just decided that it's not worth the effort — for now. Problem is, some of those decisions can come and bite you in the ass.

India:

India must now be watched very closely. Hopeful signs, including the recent surge in scientists, the general spread of literacy, the smoother flow of Chi pathways and the increased technology in the area, must be balanced against the disturbing reports that we have heard of the bewildering recent actions of the shen in the area and the continued difficulties of feeding the entire population.

Recent efforts to improve food sources in India by increasing the amount of sunlight directed at food crops have proven less than successful, although Dr. Qoro, an advocate of this practice, strongly disagrees with us here. Pointing out the surge of Chi that spread through the continent in the recent aftermath of the Pakistani-India nuclear development, Dr. Qoro maintains that the realization of atomic power has smoothed the conduction of Chi and that the recent natural disasters are merely symptoms of the uncontrolled release of this energy.

The actual source of that Chi is, however, still uncertain, with Dr. Qoro asserting that the excess Chi in fact came from untapped sources released by the unexpected explosion of several neutron bombs in the area. Clearly, the subject requires further study. In addition, the forcible arguments made by our colleagues in the Zi Guang about the difficulties with shen, soothsayers, would-be prophets and the like regarding millennial prognostications connected with Hindu mythology indicate that some substantial current or pattern as yet undeciphered continues to permeate the region's Chi.

We are also concerned by the undeniable fact that many of the best and brightest scientists from India are choosing to join the ranks of the Metal Dragons instead, with the majority joining the forces of Iteration X. While we can only applaud Iteration X's continued attempts to bring order to this troubled subcontinent, we are less pleased by the drainage of potential scientists who would be better off raising India to greatness than chasing another fortune in America. A few of our colleagues have suggested the alternative of offering higher salaries for such personnel. While this must certainly be considered, we must also caution against the risk of beginning a bidding war against the Syndicate.

In the meantime, the disputed Kashmir region provides an excellent testing ground for new weapons.

Afghanistan:

While we applaud the recent efforts of the Taliban to bring order to this chaotic place, we admit to some concern with the results. First, members of the Taliban steadfastly refuse any of our assistance or business offers. This would hardly be a concern were they not in such need of our services. The sanitation, health care and educational facilities all suffer due to the country's history of difficulties with the former Soviet Union. Until the social structure stabilizes, further control over Chi flow is impossible. We must be certain to take advantage of the chaos not only to study local customs but also to use these to promote our own understanding of proper order.

Teko: *Truth is, I don't think anybody knows what's up there. I've heard all kinds of things — like the fact that the Taliban is actually this gung-ho sect of the Miao Guan, and the Miao Guan's been cashing in a few favors with some more armored personnel. Only problem is, the Taliban's the least of your problems — I've heard that there's all kinds of things crawling up there — things that took out several NWO agents with the Russians back in the 80's and never left. I've heard*

that it's anything from some type of hengeyokai tribe — if you can believe that — to a group of rebel mages. Whatever it is, it took out a whole group of Strike Force Zero people and a separate group of Agency 99 agents — and those guys have the best of the best. Worse, the tighter the Taliban's grip gets, the stronger the chaos grows, and the stronger that — whatever it is — gets. Way I look at it, this is either the best place on earth to launch your career, or the worst.

Singapore:

Completely under control. While it is unfortunate that this control is not ours, it cannot be denied that the Syndicate has given us all a model of order to work from. All agents should continue to visit Singapore on a regular basis for study and research.

We have, however, noticed a certain reluctance among our agents to visit Singapore on a regular basis, with certain members complaining, as we understand, of boredom. Let us assure you: If you wish for excitement, Singapore has much to offer. Please contact Mr. Ishuri for more information.

Teko: *Another name for my little black book....*

NEW EQUIPMENT



If you've seen it in anime, manga or wuxia, or on any science fiction show, it's been made by one of the Dragons — Metal or Elemental. But bear in mind: many of those things are expensive.

The following list includes a few items that most agents can expect to come across at one point or another. As always, the agent with the right *Requisitions, Backing or Devices* may have some of these useful gadgets — or, with good xuanxi, might be able to borrow some.

THE DoCo

Grafted on the skin of many valued agents, this high-tech watch is part communicator, part supercomputer and part Chi conductor. The watch monitors the agent's life signs, allows her to remain in constant contact with superiors and teammates, brings up general information about most people at a touch (name, current employment, debt level and so on), gives basic street directions for most cities and can be used to store small amounts of Chi for emergencies. High-level agents can also use the watch to connect to the Digital Web, a use forbidden to newer agents. Finally, the watch can provide credit card numbers for financial emergencies. Most of these charges are later deducted from the agent's salary, of course, but most agents find the ability to purchase any vehicle on demand well worth any later inconvenience.

The DoCos are so useful that many Elemental Dragons, even the technologically wary Miao Guan, wear one. DoCos are removed only upon the death of an agent. Indeed, many agents believe that removing the DoCo may bring about an agent's quick death — perhaps because of the massive fluctuations in Chi that such a removal causes. In any case, agents attempting to sell such lucrative devices find themselves quickly stymied. Once removed, the customized DoCos do not work for anyone else, Awakened or otherwise, and agents who try to destroy or sell a DoCo often find themselves lacking the ability to breathe within a few days.

DoCos are reserved for the use of Elemental Dragons only; no agent claiming allegiance to the Western Dragons has ever been known to be granted the great privilege of owning one.

System: A typical DoCo holds up to ten points of free Quintessence, though the agent is usually responsible for charging his own DoCo. This is, of course, in addition to the DoCo's capabilities as a rather excellent computing device.

At the wounded level, the DoCo immediately starts monitoring the agent's Chi level and sends a small but steady source of Chi through the agent's body (one point per turn, up to its stored limit, without the agent needing to use Prime). If an agent becomes incapacitated, the DoCo sends out an emergency signal that will alert all DoCo's in the immediate vicinity as well as any nearby bases or

corporate headquarters. All agents are expected to respond to these calls immediately.

IMPERIAL TIGERS

Created by the Taiping Tianguo, the Imperial Tigers guard all of their outposts and have recently been spotted guarding the distribution centers of other Dragons as well, including several throughout Southeast Asia, home of the Metal Dragons. Each center may be patrolled by anywhere from two to twenty tigers.

The tigers are formed of an organic steel, the exact creation of which remains a deep secret to the Taiping Tianguo. The steel is remarkably flexible, allowing the tiger to shift into any number of forms. While on simple guard, most tigers disguise themselves as simple metal posts, metal statues, or even small machines. Even Awakened agents may stroll right past an ordinary metal chair, never noticing the tiny metallic eyes in the armrests, until the chair suddenly shifts — into the form of a five-foot-tall, six-foot-long tiger with razor sharp teeth — and eyes glowing with clear light.

Each tiger is controlled by a small jade-chip computer, providing it with a certain degree of artificial intelligence — far more than a regular computer, but less than that of a human. This computer also constantly feeds a steady data stream to a central Taiping Tianguo computer. If this central computer senses the need, it alerts other Taiping Tianguo agents in the area — and occasionally signal certain Miao Guan to handle any questionable memory problems. Usually, the computer contacts agents solely for clean-up purposes.

Recently, a few Zaibatsu agents have claimed that these computers have had a few... problems. Some of

the tigers appear to be attacking Sleepers, while one or two of the less important centers have been infiltrated by Zaibatsu agents who claim, under questioning, to have been testing the security systems. The Taiping Tianguo fiercely deny these tales and continue to install Imperial Tigers in sensitive business and government areas throughout Southeast Asia and China.

System: As unusual constructs of Chi, jade, steel, technomagic and stranger stuff, the tigers certainly push the bounds of believability. Tigers suffer problems from Paradox, which tends to erode their functionality.

The typical tiger has ten health levels, takes no wound penalties, fights with an effective rating of 5 in all Physical Attributes and uses tremendous organic steel claws that inflict Strength +4 lethal damage. Tigers are not particularly intelligent, and they can be trapped or tricked, though their ability to shift (over a turn) into other forms affords them great leeway for stealth.

The typical tiger isn't smart enough to use this to fit through small areas, though; most simply perform surveillance.

Tigers that gather too much experience and Paradox have a tendency to develop instincts of their own and may even stalk mages for Quintessence....

VENDING MACHINES (CHI RESTORATION)

Agent Tousang, your DoCo is giving an irregular beeping noise. Please check its energy level. Ah. As I thought. Please go to the fruit drink machine on your right — yes, the one over the lei line. Excellent observation. Yes, the one that looks as if it is selling high-energy fruit drinks. Actually, it is selling high-energy



fruit drinks. But if you move to the side — there. That round metal piece on the left side? Place your DoCo there.

Yes, the cities do seem to have an extraordinary number of vending machines, do they not? We have vending machines for everything, do we not — sodas, hot drinks, cigarettes, underwear, rice noodles, manga comics, batteries... but of course our care in placing them has had a purpose. Why do you think we have been so assiduous in placing them throughout the cities? Oh, efficiency is a major concern for everyone, of course. But, as we will repeat again and again, the best way to hide the extraordinary is to make it ordinary.

I thought you would be impressed. And yes, do grab a fruit drink. It's been carefully created by the Zi Guang. You'll find it greatly refreshing.

Agents working in the major city streets may replenish the Chi stored in their DoCos by accessing any of the thousands of vending machines located over minor Chi lines. DoCos can, if not burned out, direct their owners to the nearest such vending machine; agents whose DoCos no longer have power must simply search the streets for a vending machine capable of releasing Chi energy. The energizing process takes only ten minutes to complete.

Bear in mind, however, that vending machines are ubiquitous throughout the Far East — almost no city block exists without at least one or two. And not all of these vending machines are capable of releasing energy. If an agent's DoCo has burned out, the searching process may take several valuable minutes or hours, as the agent pounds vending machine after vending machine in frustration as the shen gets ever further away.

About 60% of the Chi machines also store specialized high-energy drinks, developed by the Zi Guang, that are automatically released during the energy transfer. Like protein drinks (also ubiquitous throughout Southeast Asia and Japan) the drinks can be used as a meal replacement.

System: A Chi-battery vending machine usually holds just enough energy to refresh a DoCo once (ten points of Quintessence). Beyond that, the machine must either channel energy from nearby sources (at a Node) or else be recharged by a service technician. This isn't to say that such machines are common; Chi is too valuable, and raw Chi too rare, to be spread about so haphazardly. Rather, these serve as emergency stations, so to speak. Each machine is shielded with the equivalent of ten dice of countermagic against Prime detection, so mages without DoCos won't stumble across them.

Additionally, the high-energy fruit drinks (the ones specifically dispensed when an agent recharges a DoCo — not the more mundane ones) use Zi Guang herbal concoctions combined with Chi management to increase the Alertness of the drinker by one dot for the next hour. Characters intending to use the drinks to artificially inflate alertness levels over a long period of time may be in for a nasty shock, however. The drinks are expensive, and the costs are taken directly from the agent's paycheck — even if the agent never uses the drink. Also, bosses are inclined to frown upon agents who grow dependent upon the drinks instead of working to raise their own skills. Multiple uses are not be directly commented on — direct communication is not the Asian way. But agents find their projects and ideas mysteriously unapproved and find themselves assigned to somewhat nastier assignments, far away from city areas and the vending machines.

ELEMENTAL DRAGON CHARACTERS



Of course, the Elemental Dragons make for compelling and complex characters. Any number of concepts are appropriate — monks, soldiers, police officers, manga artists, what have you. Because of their synthesis of technology and mystic Chi study, the Elemental Dragons can come from just about any walk of life, and debates run high over the proper balance of mysticism with science.

Most Elemental Dragon characters function much like Technocrats, as described in *Guide to the Technocracy* — including their need for equipment and their specialized Backgrounds. However, an Elemental Dragon holds a separate affiliation with one of the more specialized groups of Asia, and isn't necessarily a stranger to mysticism.

MYSTICISM AND SCIENCE?

The Elemental Dragons seem to practice a blend of mysticism and science. To some degree that's true, but it's not a total synthesis. Remember, despite their use of Chi, most Dragons rely on tools, not just mind-body techniques, to actually channel Chi energy in productive ways. An Elemental Dragon can't simply use a Traditional mage's techniques because "he accepts mysticism"; the Dragons accept the mystical on *their own terms*, which includes rigid definition and classification to be certain that the proper order and harmony proceeds from manipulation of Chi. That, in turn, requires extensive work, study, dedication and use of harmonizing tools. An Elemental Dragon is every bit a Technocrat, simply with a different focus on the final product.



ZI GUANG

Perfection.

A simple goal.

It's proven remarkably frustrating to achieve.

But if the Zi Guang have learned anything over the years, it's patience.

The origins of the Zi Guang are, even for the Elemental Dragons, wrapped in obscurity and propaganda. Like the other Dragons, the Wood Dragons claim a preeminent place in history, claiming a founding date of approximately 10,000 B.C. (It should be noted that, like the other Elemental Dragons, the Zi Guang have completely dismissed the earlier idea of the Ages of History and agree with the dating systems of Western Conventions.) The Zi Guang claim to have been the first to develop rice cultivation, forcing the Chi stored in the ground to warp rice plants to make them more productive, creating paddies that sped rice growth by focusing the natural Chi energy towards plant roots.

Carefully cultivated fields made for lines of Chi along artful paths, or curled about in wards, spiritual shapes and salubrious patterns. However, it did not take the Zi Guang long to realize that the amount of Chi that could be thus controlled was limited indeed, and they began to search about for other sources.

Eventually, they found these sources in the human body.

Other Dragons whisper that the Zi Guang's early experiments with Chi created terrible, dangerous monsters —three-headed men, ape-monsters covered in orange fur, giant cats with the intelligence of humans. Whatever the truth, these early experiments were soon dispatched, with the Zi Guang realizing that the human form, with its careful balance of two eyes, two legs, two hands and so on, was the perfect vehicle for carrying Chi. Unfortunately, as the number of humans began to grow, so did the amounts of Chi in the ecosystem. The acceleration of Chi accumulation led to excesses of energy that proved difficult to control, even dangerous, in high concentrations.

It was at this point that some members left for the Shaolin Temple, while others, remaining in the Yellow River valley, began to work on two separate projects. In China, the Zi Guang emphasized a structured family system, a system that enabled the Zi Guang to keep a better watch on dangerous outgrowths of Chi, as well as quickly find and adopt into their ranks any promising manipulators or mutations. As the Chinese people grew more numerous, so did the amounts of Chi. For the most part, the Zi Guang claimed credit for Chinese culture and growth as a civilization by propagating cultivation, cities and medicine. The Zi Guang hoped to shape entire cultures so as to promote massive harmonization of Chi energy, the result of which would be a perfect energy that they could tap to surpass the frail limits of their previous experiments. The rising and falling Chinese empires reflected cycles of Chi disturbance, and many opponents debate the true level of the Zi Guang's influence; these farmers, such opponents argue, certainly didn't create religion or academia.

What no one disputes is that the Zi Guang had a powerful influence over the Shang dynasty, an influence propelled by their interest in the Shang art of divination with dragon bones. The Zi Guang soon recognized that the Shang divination ceremonies caused swirls to appear in the Chi slumbering in the ground — swirls that could be traced to later problems.

Clearly, these swirls had to be controlled. A few careless experiments, however, taught the Zi Guang that humans in their current physical condition could control only the tiniest amounts of Chi. Worse, as the Zi Guang continued to study these swirls, they discovered that the swirls could also be intensified by human emotion in some as yet undetermined manner. Indeed, as the Zi Guang soon discovered most of the Chi was not, as they had previously thought, contained within the ground.

Clearly, the pace of change had to be slowed and carefully monitored. But how? Desperately looking about, the Zi Guang hit upon a plan to use the human body itself. By carefully cultivating humans with strong Chi and propagating masses of humans, the Zi Guang could not only generate more Chi sources but also build lynchpins that could determine the flow of Chi around them. By Awakening more humans to their potential, they could create new shapers to aid in their task — or, perhaps, even raise all of humanity to this potential.

But while some Zi Guang worked to develop the strengths and perfections of the body, others worked on quite a different system — the creation of government and order. The Zi Guang claim Confucius as one of their greatest thinkers (though of course more than one Awakened group claims Confucius as a member). To the Zi Guang, the ideal of living beings working in harmony, as seen in the ant colony, shows a step of evolution beyond the thinking of the individual human; Zi Guang believe

that the society itself takes on characteristics of a mind with all the salient features one expects of a massive consciousness spawned of thousands of smaller minds. By bending the thoughts of many in similar directions, with concomitant adjustments to the flows of Chi, the Zi Guang create a new organism — one for which each Chi-filled living mind serves much as a single brain cell would in a human, yet with the full power of every individual contributing to the whole.

Many Zi Guang embraced communism, believing that its doctrine of utter equality would finally provide the order that had escaped them for so long. Others turned towards the bureaucracy that they had created, strengthening and refining its systems to ensure that Chi perfectly flowed along the artificial lines they created. Slowly the Zi Guang came to integrate the idea of human channeling guided by bureaucracy — raise taxes in one village, watch people flee and lower the ambient living Chi; encourage building in another province, see the rise in Chi along the directions of new habitation. Order and precision, planned growth and wellsprings of Chi — the Zi Guang saw the rise of Chi energies as China's population grew in subtly manipulated directions.

Today, the Zi Guang work throughout China and with their putative allies the Miao Guan to oversee much of the development of China's government and society. Millions of Chinese still work at subsistence agriculture with only a limited interaction with technology, and these masses are shepherded by the Zi Guang. At the same time, biotechnology and the tools to shape living organisms (such as those used by the Progenitors) fascinate the Zi Guang, and some progressive elements believe that such "shortcuts" might allow the group to achieve their goals of Chi-shaping life forms more rapidly. Recently, however, the Zi Guang and the Miao Guan have been seen to split; Zi Guang have embraced some elements of biotechnology, while Miao Guan have remained staunchly traditional, and some Zi Guang have advocated radical shifts in government, perhaps through eugenics or bioengineered citizens, which the Miao Guan find distasteful. Whether the Zi Guang truly become modern biotechnicians or find some balancing hybridization of bioengineering with tradition will determine the relations between the Elemental Dragons for the new millennium.

The Zi Guang tend to work well with most other Dragons, although they frown on what they see as the excesses of other groups. As a whole, members tend towards conservatism; the risks and gambles taken by the Taiping Tianguo are not their style. Also, the Zi Guang believe that controlling Chi requires stability, a calm mind and a proper attitude toward cultivation, perhaps a holdover from their agrarian past. Zi Guang deplore the rapid changes brought about by the Zaibatsu or the increasing dependence upon technology fostered

by the Technocracy; to them, tools and changes serve to promote newer, better forms of living beings, capable of greater harmony with Chi, not rude constructs to direct Chi. To this end, the Zi Guang often work in rural and suburban areas, spreading their peculiar brands of social psychology and agrarian growth, hoping that Sleepers will follow the patterns that they establish and slowly learn to move more harmoniously with Chi.

Most of the Sleepers, unfortunately, carry far more Chi than their souls can safely hold. While this does not cause large problems in less populated areas, densely populated areas such as China and India overflow with dangerous amounts of Chi that must be brought under control. And places such as Tibet, where the Chi is already in a naturally overvolatile state, present particular difficulty. Without careful control, the wild Chi in these places can become a deadly danger to Sleeper and shen alike. Fortunately for Sleepers, Zi Guang are masters at seeing — and drawing out — the Chi held by every living soul.

The Zi Guang are currently in some disarray. Older members still cling to ancient tradition and resist change, pointing out — with some justification — that change has brought nothing to China except for grief. Such members increase the need for xuanxi by increasing the amount of bureaucracy needed to approve projects. It doesn't always work; both the Zaibatsu and the Saensaeng are becoming experts at this skill. The Taiping Tianguo, in fact, revealed the limitations of this power when, desperate for a large, reliable source of Chi, they battered through the defenses of the Zi Guang and built the Yangtze River Dam. New members argue that technology provides all of the tools to promote mass culture and Chi formation, and that the Zi Guang should act quickly and decisively to cause such change, in effect bootstrapping to the next level of evolution. But where would that lead?

SPECIALTY SPHERE: LIFE

Common Apparatuses: Agriculture, medicine, bio-engineering, group actions, herbs, poultices, animal parts (rhinoceros horn, duck's feet, shark livers...)

THE SAENSAENG

Beauty. Culture. Honor. The way of the warrior.

The older Saensaeng like to tell the tale of what the Dragons first saw when they first truly *saw* the world. The Wood Dragons saw the flaws in the people they were meant to serve and began to fix them. The Water Dragons saw opportunity, the Fire Dragons saw only danger and the Spirit Dragons could hardly see the world at all. Only the Dragons of the Earth could look about and see the beauty in the world, and only the Earth Dragons had the eyes to see the art that would come of it.

Younger Saensaeng dismiss this story as the fable that it is, but all take pride in their heritage as the most cultured of all Dragons. To hear the Saensaeng tell it, the Taiping Tianguo are little more than wild mavericks; the Miao Guan are hopeless idealists, the Zi Guang but cowardly plotters unwilling to move beyond their bureaucracies; and the Zaibatsu traitors to all the beauties of Asian culture in their mad rush for technology. Only the Saensaeng have the courage and the ability to guide Asia along the careful line between tradition and modernity.

The Saensaeng trace their heritage back to the Court of the Chrysanthemums, a group of Chi'n Ta that gathered about the imperial court of Japan in the early 8th century, gathering its members from both artisans and warriors. The Saensaeng takes credit for developing the orderly elements so essential to Japanese society even today — the tea ceremony, flower arranging and bushido. In the 14th century, for unknown reasons, they surrendered their political power to the rival Court of the Plum Blossoms, to regain it for a short time later in the mid-19th century. In World War II, humbled by the devastating Japanese defeat, and to flee vengeful rivals among the Zaibatsu and the Syndicate, most court members relocated to South Korea, where they renamed themselves the Saensaeng. Watching the enforced modernization of Asia in horror, the Saensaeng dedicated themselves to the preservation of Asian culture while still admitting the usefulness of technology. Why not use a computer to recreate the beauty of the old Asian designs?

Aristocrats to the core, agents of the elegant Saensaeng include several members of the Japanese imperial family, including, it is said, the current emperor. (It is also said that the current emperor may be using Chi to prevent the birth of his grandson, although the precise motives for this remain unclear.) Other agents come from humbler origins, but most have (or claim to have) royal or noble blood in their veins.

The Saensaeng use Chi to gather and to create works of beauty. While other groups may foster human development, seek newer and better tools or turn inward to mental focus, the Saensaeng recognize the split in the human soul between warrior and artist, and they seek to placate both. Warfare becomes an art form, while the powerful Chi generated in the heat of passion and battle turns into artistic expressions laden with ardor.

But whatever their personal origins, the Saensaeng are now bitterly divided, with more than half of the agents now living in South Korea under a rigid command structure and a smaller enclave working in Japan to undermine the Zaibatsu and, in their words, "restore imperial Japan to the glory she once held." On the surface, they have been remarkably unsuccessful. Outside observers, however, consisting of the Zi Guang and the Taiping Tianguo,

have noticed that although the Zaibatsu have made every effort to eradicate the concept of a restoration of imperial power, these efforts remain unsuccessful. The emperor remains on his throne, a loud conservative minority still speaks for the old ways in the Diet and the Zaibatsu hold firm control over Japanese business interests.

But, note the Saensaeng, in the Zaibatsu's rush for further modernization, they have destroyed much of what was beautiful and great about Japan. The traditions, the honor, the culture — these, not large neon signs and computers, made Japan in the past and will make Japan in the future. While no Saensaeng would advocate a complete return to the past — modern civilization offers far too many advantages — they still argue strongly for the importance of tradition, noting that tradition leads to order, and order to peace, safety and the wellbeing of all.

The Saensaeng, whether Korean or Japanese, keep their blood pure and hate other cultures with a deadly disdain. Very few Saensaeng bother to study or understand other cultures. Saensaeng also intermarry, marrying cousin to cousin and occasionally even half-brother to half-sister to keep the line pure. While this has resulted in some genetic disadvantages, other traits breed out more strongly, and these Saensaeng are often among the most talented of scientists. Natural family traits for innovation or incredible physical prowess often breed true, and in some cases more mystical elements seem to follow heritage — properly respectful Saensaeng may garner the respect of their familial spirits and some display a hereditary power to channel and shape Chi without the need for concentrating arts like swordsmanship or haiku writing.

Several Saensaeng continue to practice the arts of flower arranging and the Japanese tea ceremony, while others spend two hours daily practicing sword forms. The majority of Saensaeng agents, however, focus on work — whether this includes developing businesses or new technologies, watching and hunting shen, or teaching the traditional ways to other Japanese and Korean peoples or, more importantly, to the family lines that may one day join their ranks. All Saensaeng value greatly the heritage that Japan nearly lost during its modernization and cling to the traditional forms of brush art, poetry and kata; a Saensaeng swordsman uses precise forms of kenjutsu handed down from the 12th century, while a painter disdains modern synthetic paints for traditional brush inks. Through rigid adherence to these techniques, the Saensaeng harnesses natural Chi energy and calls up confluences of divine power. A kiai shout channels the swordsman's stroke into a blow capable of shearing stone without nicking his sword, or the power of his poetry enchanting with the fire of passion.

Although the rigid power structure of the Saensaeng may seem oppressing, it has its benefits. Younger

Saensaeng agents are trusted far more than subordinates of any division and are given much more leeway. The familial bonds run strong, and Saensaeng hardly fear betrayal; the warrior instinct honed along with bushido, combined with fierce loyalty to tradition and family, makes it nearly impossible to break a Saensaeng.

SPECIALTY SPHERE: FORCES

Common Apparatuses: Swords, poetry, tea ceremony, flower arranging, origami, music, silk weaving

THE MIAO GUAN

In a group of Technocrats, the Miao Guan stand apart. Uncomfortable with technology, many of the Spirit Dragons are still happier to spend hours crafting a painstakingly calligraphed letter than to send an e-mail. Let the Taiping Tianguo flash their fancy business suits and cellphones around; a typical Miao Guan is more likely to appear in dull blue working clothes or sometimes even (gasp) a simple martial arts uniform. That's not to say that they eschew the habits of the business environment altogether, but rather that those are saved for very special occasions — usually meetings with other Dragons. And yet, these plain, unassuming men are the most feared of any Elemental Dragon — even if most usually carry no visible weapons at all. After all, the Miao Guan have a far superior weapon: their minds.

Centuries of study have made the Miao Guan absolute masters at controlling not only their own minds, but those of others. While new agents focus on using their minds to channel the "psychic powers" classified by Strike Force Zero and the Progenitors, more traditional agents rely upon breathing techniques, internal alchemy, special herbal infusions and Chi-focusing postures. By reflecting their bodily Chi inward, the Miao Guan shield themselves against mental intrusion and learn to enhance their sensory powers. Later, the Miao Guan learns to control Chi as it flows naturally out of his body, directing it to penetrate others and influence their thoughts or actions simply by forging an emotion or intent within the Miao Guan and then carrying it to the victim.

In addition, the Miao Guan are masters at extracting information. The extraction does, of course, have its costs — extreme headaches, pain and fatigue for the recipients and lengthy sessions with the healers among the Zi Guang afterwards — if there is an afterwards. Far too frequently, foolish shen attempt to resist the inquisitors among the Miao Guan; the result is always unfortunate for the shen. It is a pity on many levels, for the Miao Guan are not, as it happens, interested in knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Rather, the Miao Guan are interested in that most crucial element: motivation. Understanding a characteristic means that it can be influenced. If a Miao Guan learns to understand a ch'ing shih's hunger, he

can feel that hunger himself, learn to control it, direct it, use it. If he opens himself to the dreams of the hsien, he can feel the grace of Heaven, then turn that to any mind that he can touch.

The Miao Guan cannot monitor all three billion minds in Asia; such a task would be impossible. Instead, the Miao Guan dip into what they term the “collective” or “group” mind — a mind theorized by the Zi Guang. The Miao Guan recognize the chaos of social systems and feel the deep emotions of entire societies. By playing upon elements of nationalism, fear, duty or anger, they can create subcurrents of emotion that spread through the society like dye in water. Although such techniques take extensive time and effort, the Miao Guan have infinite patience; after all, they long ago mastered their own desires, whims and impulses.

Above all, the Miao Guan are peacemakers. Older agents can remember the horrors of World War II; some can even remember further back, when China was rocked by bloody civil wars that destroyed families and left penniless orphans crying in the streets — and China at the mercy of foreign invaders. The Miao Guan have sworn that never again will they allow China to enter such a state — even if it means that no one in China may have the luxury of free will.

The basic Miao Guan training techniques are standard amongst the Elemental Dragons and include regimens for increasing intelligence, perception, alertness and wits over time. Certain particularly adept agents may also gain physical improvements as their bodies follow their minds, and a few attune themselves to the flow of spirits; expanding awareness allows the Technocrat to sense the potent impulses wrapped in Chi that make up ephemera, beings existing in planes of pure thought or emotion.

It is rumored, too, that despite their apparent disdain for machines, the Miao Guan are quite capable of sending their minds into computer systems and read all that they contain. Certainly the Taiping Tianguo fear the Miao Guan’s interference. As with all rumors of the Miao Guan, though, this could be simply due to their own misinformation and propaganda. The unassuming Miao Guan can easily gain access to nearly any location and plant such phantasms as they desire; who can speak to their true capabilities? Nevertheless, just as Iterators posit that human and computer consciousness merge on some plane, the Miao Guan seem to recognize the flows of information. Even though they eschew technology, many Miao Guan seem to intuitively grasp the functions of computers.

SPECIALTY SPHERE: MIND

Common Apparatuses: Sutras, books, complex equations, abacus, torture devices, body language, meditation

THE TAIPING TIANGU⊕

Recklessness. Gambling. Wild times. Feats of daring. One cannot have order without a little fun.

Members of the Taiping Tianguo are loose cannons, and most like it that way. It would be wonderful, they say, if the world could indeed be the model of the Seven Kingdoms of Heaven or the Celestial Bureaucracy. However, you can’t really expect such ancient models to hold true in modern days. Asia is rollicking forward — and the Taiping Tianguo is more than eager to lead the way.

While the Taiping Tianguo is centered in Taiwan, its members can be found scattered throughout Asia — indeed, far more so than any of the other Dragons. Agents have interests anywhere that money changes hands, risk and daring brings promise or the shadow of destruction precedes renewal. Across Asia, cesspits of iniquity like Singapore provide outlets for every possible desire. In breaking the limits of taste, one comes to understand them, to see the boundaries that humans impose upon themselves or the walls that societies build around themselves. The Taiping Tianguo encouraged all manner of divisive elements, from prostitutes to gamblers to soldiers to drug traders, specifically to see how such wild elements affected the ebb and flow of Chi. Indeed, many Chi-damaging acts — suicides, drug abuses and perversions of holy ritual — stem from the exhortations of the Taiping Tianguo; create a means to bend or break Chi and you test its limits or find its counterpoints.

Most recently, the Taiping Tianguo has almost finished the Yangtze Dam project, a project that will gather and control the great Chi created by the mighty river. Several members of the Zi Guang have opposed this project, claiming that attempting to regulate natural Chi with artificial constructs instead of living elements taints the Chi. The Taiping Tianguo doesn’t care: Its project gives it information, a means to see just how much the flows of Chi can take before they’re disrupted completely. If the dam works and the Chi is harnessed, the Taiping Tianguo can reap the benefits; if it fails, it discovers another means to counter the Chi of its enemies and comprehend the destructive half of the cycle.

The Taiping Tianguo, unlike the other Dragons, understands the need for balance within Chi. Or perhaps it’s that the Taiping Tianguo sees a different sort of balance — while other Dragons believe that Chi prospers from living things and grows in controlled flow, the Taiping Tianguo focuses as much upon the destruction of Chi as upon its creation. For this reason, the Taiping Tianguo isn’t nearly as erratic and random as many other

Dragons believe. While a Taiping Tianguo may choose to indulge in wanton vices to taint Chi energy, this not only allows him to learn more about the nature of Chi but also teaches him the nature of vice. Eventually, the Taiping Tianguo hopes to control chaos itself in its pursuit of order. Other Dragons may work to eradicate chaos; the Taiping Tianguo creates order by bringing order to chaos.

In this modern age, the Taiping Tianguo delights in the artifacts of technology, especially the incredible complexity afforded by computers and advanced physical sciences. Every opportunity to promote or examine complex systems is another chance to see a means of ordering chaos. While the Taiping Tianguo doesn't invest as heavily as the Zaibatsu in the development of technology, it does have significant interests in its country's computer industry. Any given Taiping Tianguo is likely to be a combination of confidence man, vice lord, hacker and chaos mathematician, all in one.

SPECIALTY SPHERE: ENTROPY

Common Apparatuses: Gambling, daredevil feats, weapons, destructive tools

THE ZAIBATSU

You have to admire their toys.

Headquartered in Tokyo, the Zaibatsu maintain high-tech labs and security facilities throughout Asia and are rumored to have extensive networks in North America and Europe as well. Working behind the front of the enormous Mikoshi conglomerate, they follow one simple goal: Eliminate the shen. All shen.

To the Zaibatsu, the shen — gaki, hengeyokai, Chi'n Ta and the Western monsters — represent a clear and present danger to society. The shen prey on the mortal population and also cause uncontrolled, deadly manipulations in the Chi field. Such manipulations can easily destroy the minds of Sleepers; the manipulations can cause dangerous physical effects as well. Indeed, geologist Ahuro Tsui claims that most Japanese quakes are caused by shen who blindly disturb large pools of Chi; such disturbances can rock the very earth itself. The Zaibatsu move quickly to control these hazardous anomalies but are forced to play a continuous game of catching up. Clearly, this is inefficient; the Zaibatsu need to eliminate the source of the trouble.



Fortunately, the Zaibatsu are positioned to do so. They are, after all, the best of the best: Superbly trained both physically and mentally, armed with constantly evolving high-tech weaponry, thoroughly educated in both science and business (most agents hold at least one Ph.D. in economics or a hard science). As the tamers of fire, the Zaibatsu claim to be the oldest of the Dragons, a claim that they have justified by noting that the taming of fire came before pottery, agriculture or medicine. And, as the tamers of fire, they understand the power of energy perhaps more than anyone else on the planet.

And yet this hubris hides a tremendous lack of self-confidence. For the Zaibatsu hold one dark secret. Most of their members are descended not from high-ranking shogun families, but from among the Eta, or unclean ones. In the past, the Eta were those Japanese assigned by hereditary birth to care for dead bodies; the lowest of the low, they were not even allowed to touch other living human beings. Most Zaibatsu change their names and identities in part to hide this heritage.

Precisely how some of these Eta managed to contact the then failing Court of the Plum Blossoms in the 14th century remains a closely held secret. Nonetheless, the fragile alliance gave the Court of the Plum Blossoms the ear of the powerful Tokagawa shogun family — and thus, they manipulated the history of Japan for the next two centuries. The court forbade any contact between Japanese and the devil gaijin, thus preventing their rivals from increasing their knowledge of Chi — even as the Fire Dragons studied the human corpses of Sleepers and Awakened alike.

The arrival of Admiral Perry brought the temporary downfall of the Court of the Plum Blossoms, a downfall corrected after the errors made by the Saensaeng in World War II.

Today, the Zaibatsu control the enormous Mikoshi conglomerate, a corporation that makes everything from

cars to video games to clothing to beverages. Mikoshi also holds some rights either outright or through subsidiaries to approximately 85% of Japan's land and is purchasing land in other countries at a tremendous rate. In conjunction with other corporations, the Mikoshi conglomerate is "the company." Once hired into a fulltime position or consultancy, an agent never leaves. Even the rank-and-file recognize that the company houses myriad complexities that no smaller corporation could hold. Through the company, the Zaibatsu exercises influence in financial matters, even pulling the strings of the Syndicate, and funds its bleeding-edge technological research. Theirs is the money and technology that funds and promotes Strike Force Zero, and the Zaibatsu's devices channel Chi as readily as the Technocracy's toys manipulate Quintessence.

Among the Zaibatsu, there's only one way to establish order: Wipe out anything that doesn't fit. Of course, in actual practice the procedures vary, but overall the Zaibatsu zealously eliminate competitors, problems and shen, often together. Fueled as they are by their heritage as laborers, researchers and ultimately behind-the-scenes politicos, the Zaibatsu don't bow to tradition; they discard the past, because they make the future. The other Elemental Dragons increasingly fear and distrust the Zaibatsu, but for now their crusade against the shen can only help to contain Chi energy, the Zaibatsu's money and technology assist all of the other Dragons and their exceptional contacts within the Technocracy keep the Elemental Dragons apprised of their Western counterparts — these excuses and more allow the Zaibatsu room to cement their grip over the outdated Elemental Dragons, one day at a time.

SPECIALTY SPHERE: MATTER

Common Apparatuses: High-tech gadgets of any sort





CHAPTER SIX: A THOUSAND THINGS OF MAGIC, A THOUSAND PLACES OF POWER



As do other mystics the world over, the Chi'n Ta have their places of power and objects of great magical potency. Like the Lightning People themselves, these places and things have a uniquely Asian cast to them, a nature and "feel"

which sets them apart from the wands and orbs and books of the Western mages. Ultimately, an Asian mystic comes to realize that neither things nor places are necessary — they are but chains shackling one's mind to the physical world.

A THOUSAND THINGS OF MAGIC



BANGLES OF INFINITE ACCEPTANCE

Arete 2, Quintessence 10; 4-Pt. Powered Talisman

This item, a group of glass and gold bangles from the Malaysian Peninsula, has been crafted for years by witches and others who seek to manipulate hapless folk into doing their bidding. When worn, they enhance a person's

appearance and perceived affability, so that even the rudest behavior is regarded as but a mere slight.

For a cost of 1 Quintessence, the Bangles of Infinite Acceptance have the following effects, each of which lasts for six hours:

- Increase wearer's Appearance by 2

— Beings speaking with the character automatically take anything he says in the best possible light and regard him as friendly and courteous — even if he acts in a shockingly rude manner. While they don't obey his orders or the like (unless they would anyway), they consider his requests seriously and provide whatever assistance they can, just because they like him so much.

BLOOD KRIS

Arete 4, Quintessence 20; 8-Pt. Powered Talisman

The kris, a wavy-bladed dagger (or short sword) native to Indonesia and Malaysia, holds for its people much the same significance the katana does for the Japanese. Through the centuries, many kris have been enchanted by pande, master sorcerer-bladesmiths. While some kris are completely benign, many possess harmful qualities as objects designed for violence and pain. Among these is the Blood Kris, a powerful weapon that contains an equally powerful curse which can bite the hand that uses it.

As a weapon, the Blood Kris does Strength + 2 damage using the basic Storyteller rules (*World of Darkness: Combat*, p. 98 for advanced statistics for the weapon). Additionally it possesses four powers:

— Tuju, or “sorcery by pointing”: Instead of stabbing someone with the weapon, the wielder can spend one point of the weapon's Quintessence to do its normal damage to anyone he can see within 20 meters (he must make a Forces roll against difficulty 7 to succeed). Some blades can also, for four Quintessence, harm anyone (regardless of his location) by stabbing one of that person's footprints.

— Song of the Sarong: When carried in its sarong, or sheath, the Blood Kris can use a Correspondence and Entropy Effect to detect danger directed toward the person wear-

ing the blade. It alerts the wearer by rattling in the sheath; the louder and more intense the rattle, the closer and more intense the danger. It cannot detect general danger (for example, an impending explosion or auto accident), only threats specifically directed at the owner (such as a sniper aiming at him). The Blood Kris can only tell its owner of the existence of the danger and its point of origin, not its nature or exactly how it's directed at the owner.

— The Silver Dance: If the owner makes a Spirit roll against difficulty 7, the hantu, or spirit, of the kris animates the weapon, allowing it to attack on its own, with no hand wielding it! For

these purposes, the Blood



Kris has dots in Dexterity, Wits, Alertness, Dodge, and Melee each equal to the wielder's dots in Spirit. It can fly at a rate of 20 meters per turn. If it hits its target, it does the owner's Strength + 2 damage. The Blood Kris has a Stamina of 5 and can soak all forms of damage (even aggravated); it suffers no actual damage from attacks, but once it accumulates four "health levels" of damage it falls inert to the ground. The owner cannot activate this power again for 24 hours thereafter.

—Indonesian Chicken Soup: If the owner spends two of the weapon's Quintessence and makes a Life roll (difficulty 7) while polishing the Blood Kris's blade with a special oil, he can transform the oil into a potent cure/preventative medicine for the common cold. Each roll transforms enough oil to affect one person; if not consumed immediately, the oil retains its potency for a number of hours equal to the mystic's dots in Life. If the person drinking the oil has a cold, that cold is cured; if he does not have one, he will not catch one for a number of weeks equal to the mystic's dots in Life + successes rolled.

However, the kris's owner must pay a price for these abilities. Seemingly gifted with a sort of malign intelligence, the Blood Kris occasionally turns on its user. Whenever the person wielding it fails a roll, roll four dice against difficulty 9. If the roll succeeds, the Blood Kris twists in the user's hand, stabbing or cutting him for its normal Strength + 2 damage. Alternately, the Storyteller may have one of the weapon's mystic abilities affect the wielder. If the wielder ever botches a roll with one of the blade's attacks or abilities, this cursed Effect automatically occurs.

DEVIL-CHASER WHIP

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

A favored weapon of the Wu Lung and others who deal with ghosts and demons on a regular basis, the Devil-Chaser Whip (or Vanquish-Spirits Whip, as it's known to some Traditions) uses a Spirit and Forces Effect to inflict damage upon immaterial beings. Ghosts, who can recognize the Whip's distinctive appearance and mystic energies, wail in fear and rage when they see one.



A Devil-Chaser Whip functions like a normal whip (Strength + 2 damage, reach of 5 hexes; for advanced statistics, see page 99 of **World of Darkness: Combat**), with one important exception: it affects ghosts, demons, and similar beings who are not ordinarily affected by corporeal weapons. In fact, it actually does more damage — Strength + 3 — to such targets.

Some powerful spirits hate and fear these weapons so much that they have vowed to hunt down and kill any Awakened who uses one. They are particularly eager to destroy any mystic who actually makes a Devil-Chaser Whip, whether for himself or someone else. Thus, anyone picking up one of these weapons makes himself a marked man.

FIREBALL PEARL

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

The Technocracy claims, and most people in the world believe, that pearls come from oysters or are manufactured in factories from chemicals. But mystics know that pearls are nothing less than the essence of moonlight itself, distilled in the mouth of a dragon. As such, pearls, especially large ones, possess great magical power. Asian mystics often use a Forces Effect to turn them into magical “hand grenades” which explode in balls of flame.

A mystic can throw a Fireball Pearl up to 20 meters; it requires a Forces roll to activate. When it hits the ground or its target, it explodes, doing one health level of damage per success to everyone and everything within a five-meter radius (the usual +1 success for using Forces magic does not apply). The victims can soak damage normally. The pearl expends all its Quintessence in this explosion; once used, it is destroyed.

Because its effect so closely resembles the effects of various types of hand grenades (especially as depicted in the movies), using a Fireball Pearl is often a coincidental Effect. Only when someone gets close enough to see what was really thrown are any questions likely to be raised.

FISHBOWL OF PROSPERITY

3-Pt. Artifact

Much of Chinese philosophy and superstition, and thus Chinese magic, derives from correspondences between words. For example, the word for fish (*yu*) is the same as the word for abundance or affluence (*yu*). Thus, to the Chinese, the fish symbolizes good luck, prosperity and wealth.

Some fishbowls, invested with generations' worth of belief in the prosperity they bring, actually do come to function as good luck talismans of a sort. When kept in the home and filled with healthy, well-fed fish, they attract an abundance of good things to the house. Whenever anyone who resides there is involved in a business deal (even something as simple as dickering over the price of food), add one success to any successes achieved on any related dice rolls. The result, over time, is usually an increase in wealth and prosperity, though an

inhabitant's predilections or personal habits may counteract the beneficial effect of the fishbowl.

A Fishbowl of Prosperity is not foolproof, however. A Fishbowl's owner must place it properly, with respect for the feng shui of his residence. If he places it in a bad feng shui location, the Fishbowl's effects are reversed and doubled—subtract two successes from any rolls relating to business ventures.

FIVE-FIRE STONE

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

A common magic weapon among some groups of Awakened, the Five-Fire Stone is a small, flat rock etched with five mystic ideograms relating to the concept of fire and destruction (some wealthy Awakened actually use large, engraved gemstones). When thrown at a target, it does as much damage as a powerful weapon, then returns to the user's hand to be thrown again!

For a cost of one Quintessence point, a mystic may throw a Five-Fire Stone up to 30 meters and have it return to his hand. He must make a roll using Melee (or other appropriate Ability) to actually hit the target. If he succeeds, the target takes three health levels of aggravated damage from the attack. The stone then returns to the character who threw it. He does not have to make a roll to catch it when it returns.

The Five-Fire Stone has the following advanced statistics using the **World of Darkness: Combat** rules:

Five-Fire Stone

Origin: Asia

Technique: Special

I: +0

A: +1

D: Special

M: +0

Concealment: P

Notes: Range: 30 meters

Fix-SEA STAFF

Arete 2, Quintessence 10; 4-Pt. Powered Talisman

Made from any one of many different substances — tung wood, dragons' bones or even metal, to name just a few — a Fix-Sea Staff is a powerful magical weapon. Many Lightning People create one, either to show they can do it, for use as a personal weapon, or to give to someone as a gift. Most of them carve their staffs with their own personal symbols or other decor that has special significance for them.

A mystic can use a Fix-Sea Staff in combat like any other staff (it does Strength + 2 in the basic system; see page 98 of **World of Darkness: Combat** for the advanced system statistics). However, the user may expend two Quintessence to reduce the difficulty of the damage roll by one (but he can only spend a maximum of four Quintessence per round).

HIROSHIMA BONE

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

Hundreds of thousands of Japanese died from the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Some were vaporized by the initial blast, but many more died from the aftereffects — the collapsing buildings, the fires, the radiation. So great was the devastation that it even affected the realm of the mystic, investing the bones of a few victims with potent energies of destruction and rage, turning them into talismans. Hiroshima Bones, they're called.

Hiroshima Bones have two effects — one relatively peaceful, one decidedly violent. The first is that each Quintessence point spent adds one success to any Effects roll relating to speaking with, invoking, summoning or controlling the dead (ghosts, zombies and the like). The Storyteller determines whether a Hiroshima Bone can affect a particular being, and what the effects are. Willworkers beware — when a Hiroshima Bone is involved in a particular Effect, the dead persons affected are much more likely to become violent or eventually slip the bonds of the mystic's control to flee or attack him.

The other use for the bone is as a weapon. Blows struck with weapon or fist while holding a bone do an additional health level of damage per two Quintessence spent (this applies only to melee weapons, not firearms).

Hiroshima Bones come in many shapes and sizes; the statistics given above represent an "average" bone, but much larger and smaller ones have been used (the most potent bone is an intact skull of someone killed by the atomic blast rather than dying from a secondary effect such as fire or radiation). Due to their nature and the way they were created, Hiroshima Bones cannot be "recharged" with Quintessence; once their initial reserve is used up, they crumble to dust.

MU-JEN

Arete 4, Quintessence 20, 8-Pt. Powered Talisman

This foul magical construct is the Chinese equivalent of the infamous voodoo doll. Carved from tung wood, or occasionally made of other substances, it allows a mystic to injure or kill an enemy from afar with a Forces and Correspondence effect.

To create a mu-jen, a mystic must use a specially consecrated silver knife and a pure block of tung wood (or whatever substance he chooses to use). He must carve the doll into a reasonable semblance of the victim (the Storyteller should require a roll or two, using appropriate Attributes or Abilities), but does not have to have a sample

of the victim's hair, blood or the like as he would with a traditional voodoo doll.

When the mu-jen is complete, its creator must make a Willpower roll to activate it; if he succeeds, no one else can ever use it. To use it, he must expend four of the talisman's Quintessence and then deliberately damage it — stab it with a knife, burn one of its arms off or the like. The effects of the damage are inflicted upon the victim as injuries, possibly lethal ones. These attacks count as aggravated damage. The Storyteller determines the exact effects of any injury to a mu-jen; running a knife through its chest might kill the victim, while simply nicking one of its arms may paralyze the victim's corresponding arm. Damage accidentally inflicted on a mu-jen by its creator, or any damage inflicted on it by someone else, has no effect on the victim.

If the creator fails any of his rolls to create or activate the doll, the doll becomes inert and never works. If he botches any of the rolls, the mu-jen affects *him*, not its intended victim — any damage he or anyone else inflicts upon it affects him (at the Storyteller's option, this may not become apparent until the first time he tries to use the Talisman...). Such "warped" mu-jen are kept in their creators' most secure sanctums, of course.

NINE JADE DRAGONS

5-Pt. Artifact

One of the most unusual weapons in the Asian arsenal is the gao loon cha, or Nine Dragon Trident. A large and cumbersome thing, it consists of a shaft six feet long, topped by a trident, with two crossbars below the fork, turned at 90 degree angles to each other, which have various barbs, hooks and points. The resulting weapon, as odd as it looks, proves quite effective in combat — in the hands of someone trained to use it. People unfamiliar with a Nine Dragon Trident have difficulty keeping it balanced, much less using it effectively.

That is, unless they're trying to use *this* Nine Dragon Trident. Made of solid jade, carved with dragons twisting around the shaft and barbs, it looks less like a weapon than an unusual, exquisite work of sculpture. But appearances can deceive. The mystic forces that created the trident made its jade harder and tougher than the strongest steel — so strong, in fact, that no force it has experienced has been able to break it.

The Nine Jade Dragons possesses several other properties in addition to its indestructibility. First, anyone can use the weapon, regardless of whether he's trained with it for years or has never even seen one, much less handled one. Anyone holding the Nine Jade Dragons automatically has one dot of Melee for purposes of using it offensively in

combat and two dots for purposes of trying to block attacks. If the user already has dots in Melee, Nine Jade Dragons adds one dot to attack, and two dots for purposes of blocking.

Using normal Storyteller combat rules, Nine Jade Dragons does Strength + 5 damage and has a Concealment of N. If you're using the rules from **World of Darkness: Combat**, it has the following statistics:

Nine Jade Dragons (Nine Dragon Trident)

Origin: China

Technique: Polearms

I: -1

A: +1

D: +3

M: +0

Conceal: N

Notes: Reach: 2 hexes

THE ORIOLE OF TRANQUILITY

Arete 2, Quintessence 10; 4-Pt. Powered Talisman

To the Chinese, the oriole represents joy (in all of its forms) because of its beauty and the beauty of its music. For many generations, the Lightning People have used this Talisman — a jeweled, clockwork oriole — to assist them with their studies and enforce calm between enemies during tense negotiations and similar situations.

When tuned to its lowest level of effect, an Oriole of Tranquility helps to focus the thoughts of anyone who can hear it. Those persons can learn more information through study, enter deeper meditative trances, and so forth. Decrease the difficulties of any such tasks by one or more (the Storyteller determines the exact effects).

At its higher level of effect, the Oriole affects all who hear it with peacefulness, tranquility and calm. No one who hears it can take violent or hostile actions toward anyone (even persons from outside the Oriole's area of effect who attack him) unless he succeeds on a Willpower roll (difficulty 10). Even then, his reluctance to engage in violence increases the difficulty of any attacks he makes by one. On the other hand, peaceful actions (such as negotiating instead of fighting) decrease in difficulty by one.

For the first effect, the Oriole spends one Quintessence per 10 minutes of duration. For the second, it spends one Quintessence per turn in a combat situation (or one that could quickly become a fight, such as a meeting of two old enemies), or one per 10 minutes during tense but more or less peaceful situations (such as negotiations).

THE RECORDER'S HEAVENLY SCROLL

4-Pt. Artifact

Throughout the thousands of years of Chinese history, more than one Emperor's court has been graced by the presence

of an unusual man known only as the Recorder of Things Strange. A scholar and scribe par excellence, the Recorder seems to spend most of his time observing the goings-on around him and writing them down for posterity. Virtually every dynasty has documents purportedly written by the Recorder, many of which have become treasured artifacts in the modern age.

Who was the Recorder, really? Modern researchers dismiss him as a myth, explaining that his sobriquet was simply adopted by many different scholars over the centuries as a way of enhancing their own careers. Since the Recorder never gave his name, or allowed artists to draw pictures of him, perpetrating such a fraud would have been ludicrously easy. Some mystics, less skeptical regarding such things, have other answers. Some claim he was a mystic himself, seeking ultimate knowledge. Others believe he was a hengeyokai of some sort (or perhaps a series of them over the years), a renegade spirit or something else entirely.

As evidence that the Recorder was more than an ordinary human, mystics point to the heavenly scroll which he supposedly wrote, though it is almost as mythical as the Recorder himself. A few mages claim to have seen or read it, and some have even written down what they claim are excerpts from it, but most who describe it are speaking from secondhand knowledge.

Physically, the scroll is just that — a large, thick scroll with wooden and brass handles. Although made of what appears to be flimsy, primitive paper, it can be torn or burned with only the greatest effort, and even then the damage somehow repairs itself over the course of several days, leaving only a slight crease as a "scar" to mark where it suffered abuse.

The virtue of the scroll is that it contains whatever story or tale the owner most wants to read — even if that story was never written! A mystic who thinks that *The Tale of Genji* could use a thrilling sequel will find that the Scroll unrolls to the beginning of just such a novel, and that he can read it as long as he likes — literally for the rest of his life — without ever coming to the end of the story if it continues to interest him. If he changes his mind and wants to read the completely correct version of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, new Middle-Earth books that J.R.R. Tolkien would have written had he lived longer or the literary masterpiece that Kaji Hanako (a high school student in 2001) will write in 2022, the Scroll shows him those works as well. Try as he might, the owner can never read all of the scroll; it is infinite, with no beginning and no end.

The scroll contains only works of fiction. It cannot be used to access reference books, true histories, accurate predictions of future events or the like. However, a clever reader might be able to find a future novel that contains information about future (to the reader) events. Whether such predictions

are inevitable or merely one possible future depends on the Storyteller and the reader.

At the Storyteller's option, the scroll may serve as a story-generating element or malign influence on a character. A mystic might have to make an Intelligence roll of some sort to put the scroll down and attend to his duties. Someone might try to use the scroll to predict the course of the Nikkei index over the next year. The scroll might actually be the prison of a demon who'd like nothing better than to possess an unwary reader and free itself from the Recorder's ancient trap.

TIDE JEWEL

Arete 5, Quintessence 25; 10-Pt. Powered Talisman

The tide dragons that inhabit the seas around Japan and China (and perhaps other places) use these fabulous magical gems to control the ebb and flow of the tides, thus maintaining the regular cycle of the ocean. Those who make their living from the sea — sailors, fishermen, ferrymen and others — depend on the tide dragons for much of their livelihood; the superstitious or pious among them sometimes offer up prayers to the dragons.

Occasionally, through random fate or deliberate quest, a mystic manages to obtain one of these jewels. Clear, unfaceted spheres of light blue or green crystal, each one is about a hand span in diameter and seems somewhat heavier than normal for an object of its size and composition. The mystic who has one must figure out how to use it; this may require research, experimentation, a quest or whatever method the Storyteller prefers.

The Tide Jewel only works when the user is within sight of the ocean. For each point of Quintessence spent, it can cause the tide to ebb or flow by one foot per minute for five miles around the user. Altering the tides this way can prevent ships from leaving port (or assist them to do so), beach large sea creatures that have come too near the shore (or free trapped creatures), drive off or attract schools of fish and so forth. The Storyteller should determine the exact effects based on the dramatic needs of the story. The alteration of the tides lasts for up to one hour per the user's dots in Forces, with an additional hour for each extra point of Quintessence spent. When the Effect ends, the tide quickly reverts to where it should be based on its normal cycle.

Because the Tide Jewel is a divine object, not intended for humanity, using one takes its toll on a mystic. For each point of Quintessence spent from the Jewel's reserve, the mystic must spend one of his own points of Quintessence (this has no additional effect; it's necessary simply to use the item at all). He must spend his own Quintessence; Tass or Quintessence stored in other Talismans will not do. If he has no Quintessence to spend, he cannot activate the Tide Jewel.

TSUKAHARA SHIGEKATSU'S AUGUST MIRROR

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

Crafted centuries ago by a Japanese mystic well versed in the magic not only of his homeland but of China as well, the August Mirror possesses several abilities. Physically it is octagonal, about 30 centimeters wide by 30 centimeters tall, and a centimeter or so thick (making it fairly heavy and not at all easy to transport by hand — though Correspondence magic simplifies the matter greatly). Chinese ideograms and *I Ching* trigrams painted in golden ink adorn each of the mirror's eight sides. They contain no message or portent; instead, each represents an object, quality or event considered auspicious or favorable in Chinese thought.

The mirror's first power is the ability to display the true visage of anyone reflected in it. Hengeyokai are revealed in their true form, regardless of their current shape; Kindred or Kuei-jin masquerading as mortals will be shown for what they are, and a mystic's power becomes apparent. The Storyteller determines who can be and how that person or persons appear when seen in the mirror.

The mirror also functions as a *lo p'an*, or "net plate" — a talisman that protects its owner against demons and evil spirits. Raise all difficulties for any such being within ten meters of the mirror by one (this requires no Quintessence expenditure). For one Quintessence per minute, the mirror prevents such beings from coming closer than three meters without suffering pain for one turn per point of Arete the owner has; the being takes one health level of damage per turn remains in this area.

Last but not least, the mirror makes it easier for its owner to locate feng shui lines. When he views an area in the mirror, the difficulty of any rolls to detect or locate feng shui lines decreases by two.

LUSTRAL WATER

2-Pt. Charm

Said by some to be the tears or sweat of the gods, and by others simply to be a gift from Heaven, Lustral Water is a potent weapon for use against the Chi'n Ta, Kuei-jin, hengeyokai, and other Awakened beings. When poured upon a being with magical abilities, it robs him of those abilities, leaving him powerless — and thus, quite likely, dead.

To use Lustral Water, a character must be within 10 meters of his target; throwing it over greater distances eliminates its effect. Use an Ability such as Melee to determine whether the character hits the target (the Storyteller determines which Ability applies). If the character hits the target, roll six dice (difficulty 9). Add the successes to a base number of 3. The total number reduces the target's

Arete, Blood Pool, Gnosis or dots in any magical ability or power (such as Kuei-jin Disciplines) on a one-for-one basis. For example, if a mystic splashes Lustral Water on a hostile Euthanatos mage and rolls 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10, his total is 5. The Euthanatos's Arete decreases by 5.

The effects of Lustral Water last for one turn per point of Willpower the character possesses. The Awakened know of no way to resist the effects of Lustral Water.

SEVEN-PRECIOUS BRANCH

Arete 3, Quintessence 15; 6-Pt. Powered Talisman

The Seven-Precious Branch is a tree limb enchanted to deflect attacks made against the person holding it. When activated, it sprouts seven magical lotus blossoms which block the attacks.

Activating the Seven-Precious Branch for a turn requires a simple spoken command and the expenditure of two Quintessence points (thus, it can only work seven times unless "recharged"). In any turn when it is in effect, the person wielding it receives +3 soak against all attacks (even aggravated damage) from one direction (typically directly in front of him). Attacks from the other direction (typically directly behind him) are unaffected but may be soaked normally. If a character uses the Seven-Precious Branch to soak attacks he normally could not like aggravated damage), only the three soak levels from the branch apply; his normal soak does not.

THE ROBES OF THE GOLDEN MANDARIN

Special Artifact (This Artifact has no "value" per se, as it is potent but also cursed.)

According to ancient legends, one of the most powerful mystics ever to live in the land of China was Gan Lau Kien,

the "Golden Mandarin," master of a hundred spells and a thousand spirits. Those who use magic say that the very air whispered in his ears, telling him mystic secrets and the names of demons. So that friends and enemies alike could see him approach, Gan wore elaborate robes made entirely of gold foil, so that he shone like the sun itself. He worked his magic upon these robes, making them more supple than the finest silk yet stronger by far than the hardest armor. Since his mysterious death, Awakened of every stripe and species have sought his robes, coveting the magical power they contain.

Sadly, whoever finds the Robes of the Golden Mandarin will find that his dreams of ultimate power must go unfulfilled. Gan is truly dead, and his robes are in his tomb, but before he died he placed a curse on his robes to prevent his enemies from using them against his followers. The robes (which can alter size to fit anyone up to three meters tall) will provide no magical powers to anyone who puts them on, but as soon as they are donned, they begin to stiffen. The hapless mystic's Dexterity is reduced by one dot immediately. For each day thereafter, reduce it another dot until it reaches 0. At that point the character cannot move at all; he is frozen in place. He can, however, still talk and consume food (assuming there's someone around to feed it to him).

Removing the robes should pose a very difficult task for most mystics. The Storyteller can craft an entire game session, or even story arc, around this quest (hopefully in a way that allows the victim to participate; if necessary for the sake of the story, extend the Dexterity loss so he can keep up). The character might find the clues to releasing himself in Gan's surviving written works (perhaps hidden among tomb paintings or the like) or at the site of some important victory that Gan achieved.

A THOUSAND PLACES OF POWER



THE CELLAR ON BOK MAI STREET

In Shanghai, where East has met West for decades, there exist many out-of-the-way back streets and alleys where even the most daring, most acclimated white devil has never ventured. One such place is Bok Mai Street, not far from the waterfront where the Westerners often congregate but an entire world away from the West and its young, foolish notions.

Far down on Bok Mai Street, past the food stalls and restaurants and shops, in a little alley between two old, smoke-blackened buildings, there's a narrow staircase going down. At the bottom of the staircase is a door, old and decrepit but plenty sturdy for all that. An old man sits next to it on a

stool, letting people in or denying them entrance seemingly at whim. Beyond that door, should one be lucky (or unlucky) enough to get past it and the wizened grandfather, is a chamber of horrors masquerading as a chamber of pleasures.

The dark, despairing emotions of those who have frequented this place for more than a century have imprinted themselves on the very brick and mortar of the cellar. Used for well over a hundred years as an opium den and place for heroin addicts to shoot up, the cellar on Bok Mai street is a miasma of swirling negative energy and malign mystic forces.

For the past twenty-five years, the negative energies of this place have attracted one horrific being or creature after another to the cellar to feed on the energies and prey on those still desperate enough to visit the place. Kuei-jin, malevolent ghosts and spirits, or Errants driven mad by some tragedy or other have dwelled here for a time, moving on when the

pickings got slim or some crusader drove them away (and then left himself, thinking that the problem was solved).

The current evil-in-residence is perhaps the most powerful ever. A “married” Nephandi couple, a *widderslainte* once named Jessica Munro and her *barabbi* “husband” Thanh Cong, chanced upon the cellar a year or so ago and have found it a most delightful sanctum from which to conduct their activities throughout the greater Shanghai area. The cellar’s malevolent aura disguises their own, making it difficult for others to track them here, and the steady stream of societal rejects provides raw material and psychic nourishment for many of their “experiments.” If they are not uncovered and stopped soon, they will become a major force of darkness within Shanghai, strong enough to repel the assault of even an entire cabal of mages.

THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

Duke: Man, this baby must have really kicked hell out of the balance of power in eastern Asia!

Guide: How do you mean, Mr. Duke?

Duke: Well, say you’re a Hun — look at it from his point of view. There you are, sweeping down from the north — you’re hot, your 10-0, you’re so close you can taste it! Suddenly — this! Instant retirement.

Guide: You make it sound unfair.

Duke: No, no, my hat’s off to you — I can see now why we hired you guys to do our railroads.

— *Doonesbury*

Stretching for 2,400 kilometers across northern China, averaging over seven meters in height and wide enough for two cars to pass each other, the Great Wall of China is the only manmade object visible from outer space with the naked eye. It’s also a tribute to the tyranny of the Ch’in emperors who first united several smaller walls into one vast wall in the third century before Christ. The Ch’in conscripted thousands upon thousands of workers to get the job done, and it’s been said ever since that at least one peasant laborer died for every single brick in the wall.

That may or may not be true. But so many people have heard the story that they *believe* it to be true, and that gives some of the bricks — the ones soaked with the most blood — a certain amount of dark, corrupt Tass. Diabolists, Nephandi, servants of the Marauders and others of their ilk seek these “cursed bricks” out for use in rituals and the creation of talismans and fetishes. Other mages, hoping to prevent them from obtaining these resources, stay near the wall to drive them away. As a result, the land around the Great Wall is often the site of major magical battles, the influx of Paradox spirits and like events. Some mystics eagerly seek it out for just such a reason, while just as many choose to avoid it.

HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI: THE GHOST ZONES

The names Hiroshima and Nagasaki have special meaning in the modern world, associated as they are with the only use of nuclear weapons against a people. If the magical paradigm prevailed, no doubt those two names would form a part of many incantations of death and destruction. But even without that, they hold an importance for modern mystics as the home of the “Ghost Zones.”

When the atomic bombs exploded, thousands of people died within seconds. Not all of those persons were willing to travel fully into the realms of the dead. Many were left with unfinished business or unresolved emotions which they could not let go of, not even in death. To this day hundreds of them remain behind as ghosts, haunting the regions of greatest destruction. Many of the living find these areas somehow vaguely disturbing and will not live there unless no other option remains. Especially sensitive people living there, including Sleepers likely to Awaken, experience frequent nightmares and emotional difficulties which make their lives all the more miserable.

Wu Lung and Wu-Keng who frequently traffic with the spirits of the dead or use them as servants often haunt the Ghost Zones as well. There they can work their magic in relative ease, though as always they must watch out for Paradox — the fact that they find their mystical workings easier does not mean they are not violating the constraints of reality.

Other Asian cities that have experienced terrifying massacres or destruction, such as Tokyo and Nanking, have Ghost Zones of their own. Nanking’s is especially horrifying, filled as it is with the ghosts of women raped to death and people used as living bayonet-practice dummies. Only the bravest, or most foolhardy, mages go there in search of ghosts and mystic experiences; Nephandi and Marauders are said to haunt such places as well.

HONG KONG

One of the greatest cities in the world, Hong Kong sits on the very southern edge of China. For nearly all of the 20th century, it was a British possession and as such developed into one of Earth’s foremost financial centers. Its culture is a unique blend of Eastern and Western, a place where people stop in the middle of a prayer to the ancient gods to answer their cell phones.

In 1997, control of Hong Kong reverted to the Chinese. So far, the city has continued more or less as it was; the change from capitalist to communist control has made little difference in business. It remains to be seen whether this continues or Beijing cracks down on the “profit mongers” infesting its newest acquisition. In the meantime, amid the deals, politics

and the general chaos, mystics and their enemies live their lives and fight silent wars in the shadows.

For more information on Hong Kong, please refer to *World of Darkness: Hong Kong*.

THE ORCHARD OF HEAVEN

While the popular image of Hong Kong is that of a crowded, modern city where life seems to move at the speed of light and businessmen conduct billions of dollars' worth of transactions every day, not all of the islands experience this frenetic pace. Odd as it may seem to Westerners accustomed only to the bustling ports seen in so many martial arts movies, some places still exist even on the main island that are tranquil and relatively unsettled, even wild.

One such place is the surprisingly undeveloped south side of the main island, the side facing away from the New Territories. While the north face of the island is as crowded as crowded can be, the south side is much quieter and open. There, clinging to the side of a sparsely inhabited hillside like a tree growing out of a cliff face is a patch of level land.

One part of it is occupied by a shack barely big enough for one person to live in. The rest of the little plateau is occupied by a peach orchard.

Inside the shack lives an old, old man whose name nobody knows. Inside the orchard dwell wonders undreamed of.

The elderly gentleman — who seems to have no trouble moving around or working in the orchard, despite his obvious advanced years — goes by the name of Chang. As long as anyone can remember, he's lived there; no normal human currently alive can remember him as a boy. This is not because Chang has outlived his contemporaries, but rather because he is not a normal human himself.

His origin is the subject of some speculation among the Awakened. Some say that he is one of the Immortals, banished from Heaven for some crime to spend eternity amid the vulgar realms of Earth. Others believe him to be one of the Pure Ones made whole again, or one of the Wyck hiding from his fellows for some reason (if so, he's doing a poor job of it). Some think he's just a very powerful mystic who wants others to leave him alone. Whatever he is, all

SONS OF THE SIXTH DRAGON

The Tong of the Sixth Dragon, which started small, has grown and become reasonably strong. Its roster changes frequently, as the many conflicts of the Awakened world and personality differences among the members take their toll. Besides Hok himself, some of the longstanding members include:

Tang Hsiao: One of Hok's oldest friends and a prominent officer in the Bank, this Wu Lung has invested years of his life in the building and defense of the cabal and its Chantry. Once captured and tortured by the Nephandi and their fomori servants, he nurses a fierce, cold hatred of those who follow the Path of Descent, and combats them at every turn. He bears the scars of their tortures all along his chest and back, and in his inability to sire children — a capability they took from him. Despite the fact that this loss was not his fault, it shames him deeply, and though he loves children, he does not look upon them or have anything to do with them, nor does he permit himself to become close to any woman.

Ushi "Suzie" Niu: Although born in China, "Suzie" Niu spent her formative years in San Francisco, and is very much an antitraditionalist — for all that she belongs to the conservative Celestial Chorus. An arbitrageur associated with the Bank, she flouts convention by traveling in circles where usually only Chinese men go, dressing in bright, festive colors and peppering her rapid-fire Chinese with Americanisms. Unlike Hok, she favors a more aggressive approach to the Tong's problems, preferring to take the fight to the enemy rather than engage in a defensive, and thus ultimately losing, war.

Vithoon Moolartsathorn: "Moolie" to his friends, this relatively young member of the Akashic Brotherhood was once a champion muay thai fighter and leg-breaker for the Technocracy. Seeking greater levels of fighting prowess, he delved into the spirituality and philosophy behind the various fighting arts he had learned, and eventually he Awakened and saw the folly of his former life. Fleeing Thailand for Hong Kong with his little sister in tow, he fell in with the Tong through a series of adventures about ten years ago. He's now pursuing a career as a Hong Kong film star while not conducting Tong business.

Hachisuga Takanoba: Rejecting the "capitalistic, soul-killing" views of his father, a Japanese salaryman, Hachisuga Takanoba worked his way through college at a noodle shop and fell in with the radical Japanese left. While participating in political activities with his friends, he chanced to meet and fall in love with a young woman named Fujiko (or so she said). But it turned out that Fujiko was a mystic of the Euthanatos Tradition, and that she'd sensed an Avatar in Hachisuga that she could Awaken. She did so, and he ended up joining her Tradition to fight the good fight against the Technocracy, which he saw as the ultimate personification of his father's corrupt ideals. After his Osaka cabal was shattered and many of his Awakened friends (including Fujiko) were killed by Kuei-jin, he fled to Hong Kong, where he got in touch with Suzie Niu, whom he'd previously met. Recognizing his potential, she brought him into the Tong and continues to nurture his magical gifts. Rejecting Hok's offer of a Bank job, he lives on the streets, appearing for Tong business when summoned.

agree on one thing: those who approach him with hostile intent or malice in their hearts never leave his domain alive and whole.

The effects of the orchard itself are also discussed at great length. Any Awakened worth his salt can sense the exudation of magical power which the place gives off, and on occasion someone has observed Chang leading another person into the grove, yet emerging alone. But when the people he takes there — invariably Awakened persons of one type or another — finally leave it themselves an hour or more later, they refuse to say what happened to them there. All in all, the place poses a mystery that many of the Awakened would dearly love to solve.

The exact nature of Chang, and his reasons for living on the back side of Hong Kong, are left for the Storyteller, who can arrange them to best suit his chronicle. The peach orchard, however, deserves further consideration —

Peaches symbolize many things to the Chinese. Their color is anathema to demons, and peach wood bows can shoot arrows that wound demons. Peaches also keep other evil spirits at bay. But most importantly, they signify longevity (even immortality). The peaches in Chang's orchard are descended from the Peaches of Immortality, a favored food of the gods that ripen only once every thousand years. The orchard in which they grow is a haven of peace and tranquility; no foul or evil thing can come there, on pain of death by soul-rending fire. But those who enter with Chang's blessing find a grove of wondrous delights, where the sun always shines regardless of the weather outside, the passage of time seems to cease and beautiful faerie folk welcome the weary visitor. Any person who enters may eat one, and only one, peach with Chang's permission. If they do so, their life span is extended by 50%, and the extra years are years of vigor and fitness, not dotage. However, if they eat without permission, or eat more than one peach, they immediately age until they crumble to dust.

THE TONG OF THE SIXTH DRAGON

One of the most crowded regions of Hong Kong is Kowloon, a mainland peninsula jutting south into Victoria Harbor from the New Territories area. It contains, among other things, Kai Tak Airport. "Kowloon" means "nine dragons" — one for each of the eight hills on the peninsula, plus one more to honor a visiting emperor. These hills channel and focus the peninsula's feng shui and determine which sites are auspicious for buildings and residences.

Situated prominently on the sixth hill, in one of the best locations on the island, is the Feng Tak Commerce Bank, one of Hong Kong's most prestigious financial institutions. Soaring thirty stories into the sky, the FTCB building is a marvel of modern architecture and ancient traditions; its builders worked harmoniously with Chinese geomancers to ensure that every aspect of the structure took advantage of or enhanced the site's feng shui.

THE CHANTRY OF THE SIXTH DRAGON

In game terms, the top three floors of the Feng Tak Commerce Bank count as a Chantry 3 (if you're using the rules in *The Book of Chantries*, you can build it to suit your own stories; be sure to throw in a few special details to make it uniquely yours). It taps the energy of a Node 4, and possesses a three-dot Library.

Their attention to detail paid off, for since its founding in 1947, the bank has thrived. Its founder, a young financial genius named Hok Wo Song, is an old man today, yet he remains hail and hearty. One of Hong Kong's wealthiest businessmen, he's weathered financial storms that brought down older banks and emerged stronger than ever. "Must be the feng shui," say other Chinese, shaking their heads with envy.

The business of the bank is confined to the lower 27 floors. The top three are for Hok's private penthouse — or so the bank employees believe. In truth, he lives just on part of the very top floor. The rest of the restricted area is a Chantry for the cabal he leads, the Tong of the Sixth Dragon.

The site of the bank, and thus the Chantry, wasn't easy for Hok to obtain; as a powerful Node, it had long been used by other mystics and less savory folk. As a young willworker, Hok fought a desperate battle in the financial, legal and mystical worlds all at once to take that Node for his own — and barely survived to enjoy his victory. Even today he is a wary and cautious man, for he knows how many people covet what he has worked so hard for.

Anyone who managed to penetrate the extensive physical and mystical security surrounding the Chantry would be surprised at what he'd find inside. The Chantry's decor is an unusual mix of the modern and the traditional. Much of it, including its conference room, looks little different from the rest of the building; it's filled with the finest modern furnishings and decorations. There are even offices with computers and other electronic amenities. Other parts, such as the library, look far more low-tech, with handcrafted furnishings and artwork, dozens of ancient artifacts and other resources, and the like. The members of the Tong (see sidebar) seem to enjoy the dichotomy.

THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE

Of all the places sacred to the Akashic Brotherhood, the most sacred by far is the Shaolin Ssu, or Young Forest Temple. According to ancient, half-legendary histories, it was erected sometime in the late fifth century A.D. by Emperor Hsiao-Wen. He built it south of Sung San Mountain, on the north side of Shao-Shih Mountain, in what would later be known as the Honan Province of China. It was built to honor an Indian monk, Bodhiruchi, who came to China to teach Buddhist doctrine.

In the next century, another Indian monk, Bodhidharma, came to Shaolin to teach. There, the story goes, he found monks so out of shape that they couldn't stay awake during

meditation and lessons. To remedy this sorry state of affairs, he began teaching them exercises and fighting techniques. The monks took to this training well, and soon began elaborating on it, developing their own fighting maneuvers by incorporating native Chinese techniques. At first called wai-chia, their martial arts later evolved into what is now known as Kung Fu.

For centuries, the Shaolin Temple was renowned not only as a center of learning but as the home of a powerful fighting style that made the monks undefeatable in combat. According to the tales, after a student trained and studied for many years, he had to pass a final exam consisting of a maze filled with traps. After successfully negotiating the maze and avoiding its perils, the hopeful had to pick up a red-hot 500-pound iron cauldron with his forearms. This branded him with a tiger and a dragon, the temple's symbols, forever marking him as a disciple of Shaolin.

In addition to their martial prowess, Shaolin warriors were also masters of many mystic abilities and powers, their Taoist magic unmatchable. Many scholars trace the origins of the Akashic Brotherhood to Shaolin for this reason, but others dispute this finding, claiming the Brotherhood originated at other, similar, temples or is simply far older.

Unfortunately, even monks as powerful as the Shaolin brothers were not invulnerable. The histories go on to relate that the first Shaolin Temple was destroyed in A.D. 617 by a vengeful king. The monks scattered; some eventually returned to rebuild the temple, while others spread out to teach their arts elsewhere (thus contributing to the development of countless different substyles of Kung Fu). Although the temple was destroyed time and again over the centuries, the monks always rebuilt it and continued their ascetic lives of martial arts and magic.

So it has gone, down to the present day. Even in the 21st century, monks still study at Shaolin, though the curriculum in this day and age is purely religious, not magical. But save for among the practitioners of the martial arts, Shaolin evokes little reverence today. Instead, it has become commercialized, a place for tourists to visit and brag about visiting, like Disney World. The Akashic Brothers do not go there anymore, for they cannot bear what it has become, how far it has fallen. Instead, they honor the memory of Shaolin and what it once stood for in their hearts.

THE SHAONLINE TEMPLE

The fingers — some say tentacles — of the Digital Web have worked their way across the world, even into the very heart of the ancient East. With satellite feeds and cellular phones, it can reach into even the most isolated of places, and in places like Tokyo and Hong Kong, it is as widely used and in any Western cities.

Some Eastern Virtual Adepts have created an electronic meeting place — a true "cyber-cafe," if you will — in the Web just for themselves and their fellow Asians. Although given no formal name, it quickly became known as the "Shaonline Temple" after some Adept's quick-witted pun. While it looks relatively small from the outside, inside it's as vast as it needs

to be to hold all of its "customers," and it comes equipped with more than its share of shadowy corners for more private meetings.

Designed to resemble a traditional Japanese noodle house — albeit one with both high-tech and non-Japanese decor — the temple serves as a gathering place where Asian mages of all Traditions (but particularly Virtual Adepts) can meet and interact. The bouncer construct manning the only public door, a huge fellow looking like a green-skinned Chinese ogre, keeps out all non-Asians and nonmystics and has an unerring sense for detecting them, even if they come in disguise. On occasion his masters have instructed him to allow a Metal Dragon into the Temple's confines, but such visits are rare at best. Should trouble break out inside, the bartender, cooks, geisha girls (and boys) and wait staff are all just as capable of dealing with it as the bouncer. But trouble is rare; the mages who use the Shaonline Temple know a good thing when they see it and prefer not to disrupt the place with petty squabbling.

THE TAIPING BATTLEFIELD

In the 1860s, Nanking was the focus of the Taiping Rebellion, the bloodiest civil war in world history, which resulted in twenty to thirty million deaths. While initially successful, the rebellion faltered, and Manchu forces brought the most important rebels (including the "Heavenly King," Hung Hsiu-Ch'uan) to bay in the siege of Nanking in 1864. During the battle, thousands of rebels were slain, and their leaders committed suicide rather than face the Manchu torturers and executioners.

The building where the Heavenly King killed himself on June 1, 1864 was torn down long ago, but nothing can erase the mystical stain left by the emotional torment and agony he felt as he watched his loyal followers, who joined him in hopes of creating a better world for themselves and their children, mowed down by Manchu soldiers. The building that occupies that place today — a large factory and attached warehouse — suffers from frequent "strange occurrences" and poltergeistlike effects, some of which have almost injured workers. The owners of the facility have difficulty keeping employees, since the phenomena scare off most people fairly quickly. Only the bravest, most desperate for work or most cynical can tolerate the situation and keep on working.

Recently, however, things may have taken a change for the better. Unbeknownst to the owners, the new supervisor they recently hired, Lop Gow Tem, is a mystic of the Euthanatos Tradition. Attracted to the place by the necromantic emanations it exudes, he plans to study the haunting and, if necessary, correct the situation. While he doesn't remain on the job very long either, he probably corrects the situation so that future workers can stay with the company as long as they wish.

Of course, depending on the Storyteller's desires, Lop's task may not go so smoothly; some complication may arise which draws the troupe into the situation. For example, an old Nephandi rival of Lop's may seize on this opportunity to take revenge on him, or the spirits of the dead rebels and Heavenly King may not want to go quietly into that good night. The possibilities are limited only by the Storyteller's imagination.

THE TEMPLE OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS

Deep in the jungles of Cambodia, where no Westerner has ever set foot, there exists a deep valley. At the bottom of that valley, like a drain set in the floor of an abattoir, lies a Node. Malignant and black, that Node is the site of a great temple built by an Infernalist named Veata ("the wind") from the leavings of the Pol Pot regime.

People the world over are familiar with the terrible "killing fields" of the Khmer Rouge, where over a million Cambodians were slaughtered because of their opposition to Pol Pot. In many cases, their skulls were placed on large racks. What only a few Cambodians know about, and refuse to tell because of utter fear, is why some of those racks are now empty. One night several years ago, a few people watched as the skulls, possessed by some life-giving force, threw themselves off the racks and then hopped and rolled in a grotesque dance into the distant jungle. Time after time, at dozens of these racks, the same thing occurred.

Had anyone followed the line of skulls, he would eventually have come to the valley described above. There he would have watched as, one at a time, the skulls put themselves into place, building the walls, doorways, ceiling, dome and roof of a vast temple. Veata was commanded to build this temple by her unnamed demonic master, who undoubtedly has more in mind than terrifying a few dozen Cambodian peasants.

The people who live in the valley of the temple, a corrupt tribe called the Charam-aska, worship Veata and her demon lover-lord. They call it the Temple of Eternal Happiness, from the eternal grins on so many of the skulls. Anyone coming to the valley to deal with Veata has to fight them — and their surplus M-16 assault rifles — first.

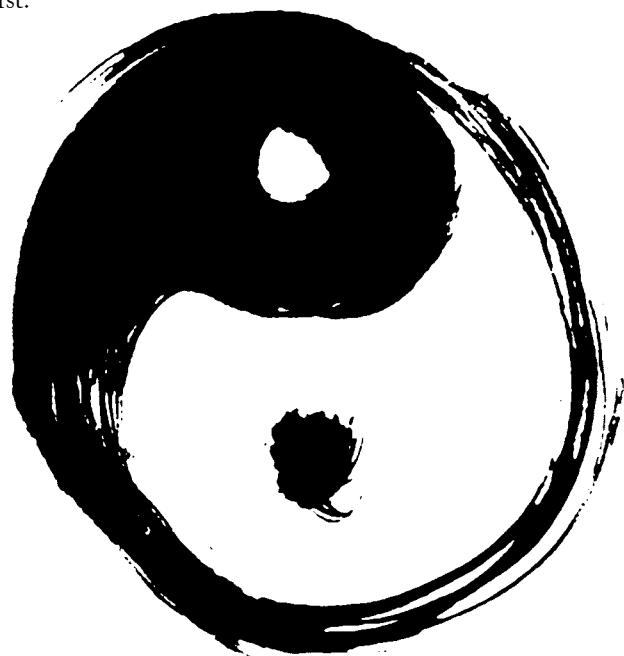
THE YELLOW RIVER

Known for millennia as "China's Sorrow" because of its devastating spring floods, the Yellow River (Huang Ho) rises in the far west, in the K'un-lun Mountains, and flows in a twisting, turning path across northern China. Sages have long described the river's mystic properties. Chief among these is that it functions as a gateway to Heaven.

According to the ancient legends, if a pure man sails all the way up the Yellow River to its very source, he comes to the place of the great peach tree of the Royal Mother of the West and enters into Paradise. Other tales say that he leaves the waters of the river to sail across the very heavens themselves, a companion to the moon and stars.

If a modern mystic wishes to explore the truth of these legends, he first has to build himself a boat. He couldn't just buy one at some dealer's wharf; he has to build it on his own, using natural materials and old-fashioned hand tools. Once that arduous task was complete, he has to sail the boat upriver, using only the wind and his hands. If the magic works as it should, he can keep traveling in the boat long after the water would ordinarily become too shallow, since he has already left the "real world" behind for the spirit realm.

Where, exactly, will he go? It's up to the Storyteller to determine exactly what this "Paradise" the stories speak of is and who the willworker might meet there. Is it the Penumbra, reflecting the holiness and spiritual beauty of the river's fountainhead? A Glen? A paradisiacal realm created by a powerful mage known as the Royal Mother of the West? Some part of the Middle or High Umbra? A Horizon Realm? A strange sort of Umbrood Realm? Or something else altogether?



DRAGONS of the CAST

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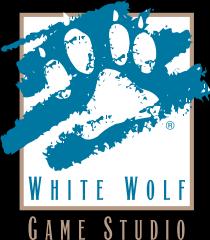
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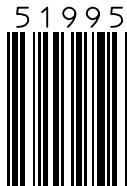
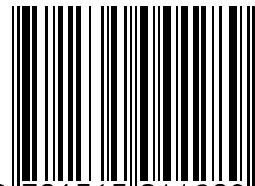


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